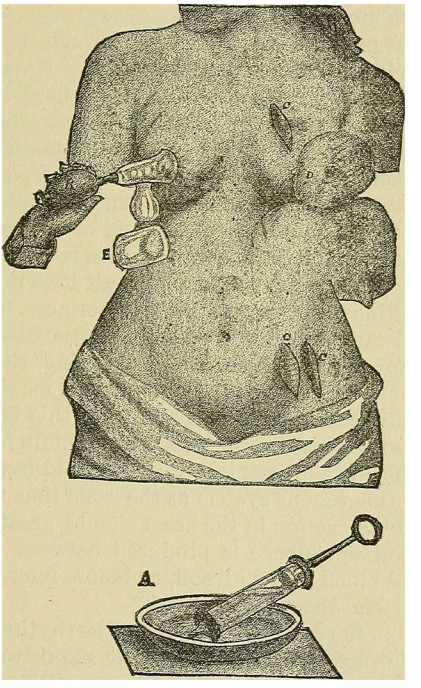
advanced BUDDHIST METAPHYSICS

exercises in sceptical spirituality

PETER EASTMAN



Advanced Buddhist Metaphysics

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Introduction

What are we trying to do in this book ? Simply to clear away some of the common confusions and mystifications regularly encountered in any quest for genuine metaphysical knowledge. This does not require great book learning or massive intelligence, merely the desire to think clearly and objectively and systematically. Anyone who wants to can do it.

And in this context, 'advanced' turns out to be the most elementary and the most basic. The most advanced Buddhistic metaphysical question any human being can possibly ask is also the simplest: what exactly is the problem with our existence, and how can we resolve it ? This is the selfsame question the Buddha asked all those thousands of years ago, and the question we still have to ask today.

So independent Buddhism is about turning the 'mind's eye' onto itself, and trying to see what we can see. 'Sceptical spirituality' means approaching all doctrines and all religious practices with the same healthy suspicion as you would any worldly proposition: in other words, do these practices work, and are these doctrines accurate and helpful ? If not, let's look elsewhere. After all, we're trying to save ourselves, not make matters worse.

1

What is ‘metaphysics’ ?

The one and only meaningful definition, and why traditional academic philosophy is unlikely ever to embrace it

‘Metaphysics’ is the quest to find the ultimate meaning and purpose of existence. It is about trying to find a decisive and conclusive resolution to the human condition, such that the human condition is fulfilled in some absolute way, and no longer at the mercy of meaningless suffering, or a dreadful sense of uncertainty. All other definitions and determinations of metaphysics are trivial, and irrelevant; and, given the critical importance of the quest for human fulfilment – our lives are not infinite, after all – really quite bewildering. Western philosophy[1] has never understood this, and its entire intellectual history has been characterised by a persistent debasing of any simple, straightforward and direct quest for objective metaphysical self-knowledge, preferring instead always to indulge either in pedantic squabbling over definitions, distinctions and conceptual manoeuverings, or in

flatulent 'system building'.

Now obviously such a provocative opening gambit is going to require considerable justification if it is to get its message across, and not be dismissed out of hand. Not because its propositions are either naïve or excessive, but rather because academic metaphysics is so perverted in its methods and thinking as to make even the most basic statement of common currency a cause for endless questioning and bickering, necessitating all manner of so-called subtle analyses and conceptual clarifications, and inevitably descending into yet another worthless intellectual stalemate. This is not to deny the importance of definitional clarity and conceptual precision, but rather to make the point that beyond a certain relatively easily attainable basic level of agreement, persistent nit-picking and semantic wrangling is a clear symptom of intellectual degeneracy, not of acuity.

And semantic nit-picking is the least of the problems: there's also the very bizarre phenomenon of 'ontological confusion', which characterises many disciplines wholly concerned with abstractions and 'theory'; and what happens is that people confuse the abstract conceptualisation of an entity with the very entities that those abstractions are meant to be a representation of, and very soon are quite unable to distinguish between the two. This is not some trivial error of procedure, easily corrected with a moment's thought, but a deep-seated, persistent and almost mystical self-delusion that can confuse people for an entire lifetime. Many scholars go to the grave thinking that they are experts in a subject when in fact they are only experts in 'ideas *about* that subject', and they have no first-hand knowledge whatsoever about the actual realities they believe they have expertise in. This is one of the many truly hard-to-credit facts about the way we human

beings think.

This is easily illustrated with examples from the supposed 'scholarly study of religion', but they could just as easily apply to anthropology and a host of other disciplines. What happens is that scholars sort various concepts into various abstract categories, and then elucidate the supposed links between these categories. The belief in the academic community is that someone who has successfully carried out such abstract scholarship is entitled to think of themselves as an 'expert in that field', rather than an 'expert in an abstract representation *of* that field'. Someone who has studied say, Buddhist scriptures, and written some heavyweight tomes on the subject, listing various supposed Buddhist conceptions and their interrelationships, will be considered by all – including many Buddhists themselves ! – to have achieved 'expertise in Buddhism', whereas their expertise is only in 'abstract ideas about Buddhism'. 'Ideas *about* a phenomenon' and 'the phenomenon itself' are ontologically separate and distinct, yet are everywhere confused and conflated, and this is especially pertinent when it comes to metaphysics.

Another example. Suppose you have the 'blessed good fortune' to be accepted at the foremost theological college on earth, where you can study theology to your heart's content. And after a certain number of years of intense reading, discussion, research, and writing, you are awarded a doctorate in theology. Now the question that needs to be asked is this: what is the relationship between a 'maximally advanced theological knowledge' and a 'direct knowledge of God' ? Does the former lead to the latter ? If not, why bother with theology ? Does reading about playing the piano lead – even by magical osmosis – to an ability to do so ? The point being made here is that without direct knowledge of

something, 'theory' – no matter how exquisite – has no real value of any kind, it's only 'conceptual white noise', and just another instance of the very many forms of mystical self-narcosis whereby we humans believe we can know something 'by association' – that is, by an act of vicarious imagining, and by mulling over abstracted ideas – when in fact only direct first-hand knowledge will do. What use is it to study everything possible about a subject, if you don't know what that subject is like in reality ? Does what you claim to 'know' theoretically even qualify as 'real knowledge' of any sort in this situation ?

But surely no one could be so stupid as to confuse the 'idea of fire' with 'fire itself' ? Well, look at the evidence. If you were to ask an academic philosopher 'what do you know about your own metaphysical reality ?' – and could get past the feeble opening gambits like 'what do you mean by 'reality' ?' – they will inevitably reach for a conceptualisation of some sort, made up of bits of other people's accounts, and present that as if it were their own knowledge. And if you then ask them to put aside what they have heard or read, and simply to report what they can see with their own 'mind's eye'[2], they will have nothing to say. Not a single word.

But isn't philosophy 'all about ideas' ? What's wrong with treating them as abstract substitutes for the real thing ? This is precisely the elemental mistake that has reduced academic metaphysics to the unmitigated tripe that it currently remains: one's metaphysical being is much more than mere abstractions and conceptual distinctions, but you can only know this with any conviction if you take a look at your own being with your own powers of observation. Otherwise you remain at the mercy of the 'big names' and their musings, and the problem with all the big names in

western philosophy is that none of them ever had even the faintest idea about the essential features of the human metaphysical condition, and how we might go about trying to grapple with, let alone resolve, its mystery. It’s as if philosophers wanted to play the piano, but early on decided that just ‘thinking about playing’ would be just as good as ‘actually playing’, and so started a discipline where you only toyed with ideas and nothing else, and they called the whole abstract procedure ‘playing the piano’. Worse still, none of them made any attempt to disabuse others of the ridiculous idea that they were actually masters of the instrument, despite the fact their fingers have never been near a keyboard. Someone playing this sort of game in everyday life would be pitied as a pathetic and deluded fool, but in the world of philosophy it could get you tenure at Harvard.

How did we arrive at such a Dadaesque situation ? Impossible to tell, but given the history of philosophy, and its millennia of misdirected and worthless speculation, we have to face the very real possibility that human beings are just not that bothered about serious questions of a metaphysical nature. They prefer the fun and games of life. There seems to be something innate in us which prevents us from wanting to think clearly about ourselves, except in a very worldly sense. We seem to be happier clutching at distractions, and holding fast to them come what may, as if this is the best we can do, and as if there is something noble in doing so. Perhaps there is, if we take an indulgent and sentimental look at our species: other creatures may have feathers or scales or whatever, whereas we humans are all about living in the moment, and maximising our worldly enjoyment.

However, for those few who are mysteriously drawn to the idea of objective metaphysical self-knowledge, and who

would really like to get to the bottom of things, there is always the option of turning one's 'knowing capacity'[3] on to itself, to see what it can reveal. This is the only possible place where authentic metaphysics can begin.

Things being what they are with our common conceptions, most people reading this will be anticipating some sort of hidden agenda, most likely of a religious nature, which will be introduced surreptitiously, putting everything into perspective. But this is not the intention here: we are only interested in pursuing objective metaphysical knowledge – knowledge independent of conceptualisations and ideology – to the extent that such knowledge is possible. We are only interested in 'playing the piano' – actually putting our fingers on the keyboard – rather than just analysing our theoretical imaginings about it.

Where do we start ? We have to begin by clearly identifying the primordial sense that we all have – at some time or another – that something is not quite right with our 'existence'[4] itself, and that nothing that happens to us in life, or nothing that we actively achieve, is ever going to change that. In other words, this 'something not quite right' about our existence lies, as it were, 'outside'[5] – above and beyond – the course of our lives, though it seems to have the ability to poison anything and everything we do in life itself with a sense of ultimate meaninglessness. This does not mean that we actually spend our entire existence in a state of existential agony, but rather that we do have to confront, every now and then, a deep sense of existential doubt, and wonder, and perplexity. Sometimes the feeling is no more than a passing thought; at others, it rises to the level of an anxiety and dread which borders on existential torture.

This sense of primordial wrongness, which we can label as our 'ontological dissatisfaction', is our lodestar – and our compass – in metaphysics. Everything we do, and think, and reflect on, has to be tested against this very deep-seated dissatisfaction, this sense of primordial wrongness, because it is the only independent yardstick we have with which to test our 'progress', or at least what we think might count as progress. And in this regard – assessing our progress – we have to cultivate a ruthless self-honesty within which we are prepared for endless disappointments rather than delude ourselves into thinking that we have achieved a final resolution – or even a temporary fix – when clearly we haven't.

And in addition to the lodestar of our 'ontological dissatisfaction' – that is, our most primordial, most basic sense of existential wrongness, uncertainty and dread – we also have a simple yet powerful intellectual resource which, when correctly employed, is key to any possible sense of clarity and lucidity. And it amounts to no more than the ability to ask, in all honesty[6], the blindingly obvious question 'Is this true ?', meaning, 'Does this idea I have in my mind's eye match the objective facts, as far as I grasp them ?', or 'Is my thinking accurate ?', or better still, 'Is this how it is ?' This whole frame of mind may seem breathtakingly naïve, and perhaps even vaguely adolescent, given the grand complexities, contortions and convolutions of academic philosophical thinking, but it needs to be clearly understood, as soon as is practicable, that these academic convolutions invariably represent not advancements in intellectual exploration, but rather an infantile self-deluding façade masking a total absence of any real grasp and understanding of the elemental principles of metaphysics: it doesn't matter how many doctorates you have, or how many books you have written, if you are unable to answer – to yourself, for yourself – simple questions like 'Is

this true ?', or 'Is this how it really is ?'

The difficulty facing this kind of portrayal of elemental metaphysics is that it destroys, at a stroke, the pompous 'clever-dickery' that underpins all of professional philosophy. Philosophers learn, as part of their tradecraft, how to argue complex topics; and by the time they have graduated they should be able to wrong-foot an unwary and inexperienced opponent without much effort, firstly by setting the terms of debate in their favour, and then by displaying a far greater familiarity and dexterity with the slippery conceptual opportunities offered by the argument they are defending. An 'opponent' – perhaps a student, or someone less familiar with the topic – likely stumbles unwittingly down conceptual blind alleys, and fails to appreciate the various 'subtle distinctions' in play, and is then made to look foolish as they attempt to negotiate their way out of a mess they are not sure how they got into in the first place. The 'senior philosopher' is then able to feel quietly confident, having witnessed yet another example of what happens when someone knows less about a topic than they do, and this can easily translate into the mistaken idea that the better you are at defending your philosophical position – no matter how abstract, arcane and worthless – the more you really know.

Yet only someone deeply beholden to philosophical sophistry in all its deluded majesty could be fooled by this kind of vacuous charade for very long. They would have to be so wedded to the system that all perspective had vanished, and with it any chance of independence of mind. It may well be that intellectual life depends on such people, and the world couldn't be what it is without them, but they are not our concern: what we are trying to do here is outline, in the clearest and simplest possible terms that anyone can

understand, the principles of the one and only area of real importance for metaphysics. It is not about cleverness, or philosophical sophistication, it is about trying to achieve a basic self-insight, in the quest for liberating self-knowledge. No special recourse to advanced thinking is required: you only have to be able to understand everyday language, and ideas in common currency. Any reasonably well-educated adult can do this.

And we can now readily understand that this approach to 'genuine metaphysics' – simple, clear, elemental self-observation and knowledge – is never likely to find favour at academic institutions. It doesn't allow for pompous cleverness, or needless complexity. It's not about conceptual interrelationships, and endless subtle distinctions; nor is it about what the big names said, or how it fits into what has already been written about: the whole exercise is only about identifying and grasping the unadorned, unmediated facts of one's existence, to the extent that one is able to perceive them, for oneself.

So having turned one's mental gaze – one's observational attention – onto one's being, as one perceives it, what do we discover ? Uncertainty and opacity, for sure, but these are elements of our primordial being that need exploration. And we also need to realise that, in order to avoid our quest for knowledge collapsing into a sense of terminal futility, perhaps forcing us to retreat back into philosophy or theology, we will have to come up with some sort of 'negotiating strategy' whereby we can think things through slowly and systematically, in the light of what it is we think we want to achieve. This kind of strategy is obviously provisional, and will necessarily be changed and improved upon in the light of whatever it is we discover – or fail to – as we continue

to observe how it is we come to know things, and how it is we are able to experience things. And the important point is that this 'negotiating strategy' can only ever be wholly centred on ourselves, as if we were the only person in existence, and the only possible sentient being of interest, because as soon as we include worldly and societal demands, we run the risk of distorting what we can see directly in front of us with our own eyes. This singularity of our own direct vision for ourselves has nothing to do with 'selfishness' or 'egotism' or 'solipsism'; it is simply a crucial feature of our experiential being: take a look and see for yourself – you have only one 'mind's eye', or, if you prefer, 'not two' of them[7].

Now let's consider the possibility that, in some crucial way, the account of metaphysics we have outlined here is, despite our best efforts, simply wrong. We've failed to understand that 'real metaphysics' is 'academic metaphysics'; and that if we want to know 'what's going on' with reality, we will have to familiarise ourselves with concepts such as 'modality', 'transitivity', 'compatibilism', 'dualistic interactionism'[8], and the rest; and of course it will be a great help if we are also able to express ourselves using symbolic logic.

The first question to ask is, why are we – as metaphysicians – interested in 'reality'[9] ? Perhaps for its own sake, in the way that some people are interested in astronomy, or birdwatching; and this would certainly account for the unmitigated drivel that passes for metaphysics in scholarly circles. But 'reality' is an odd subject to be dispassionate about, and we can't really take that position seriously. We are only interested in 'reality' because of the enigmatic nature of our being – half hidden, half available to us – and we hope that by getting a handle on what we think is its ultimate nature

('reality'), we might be able to resolve the disturbing mystery at the core of our existence.

What mystery ? The mystery of our persistent existential dissatisfaction, and the mystery of our inability to know what, if anything, is causing it, and the mysteriousness of the mystery itself: what it is to be caught in a trap that we can't seem to get out of, while not even knowing what kind of a trap it is supposed to be ? We don't even know the extent of what we don't know.

What, then, are our options ? The possibilities might look endless, but they can be reduced to an important few: we could dismiss the problem, and try to ignore it; or we could anaesthetise ourselves, or we could turn to an ideology – religious or secular – in the hope that the sense of mystical wellbeing that faith of this kind affords us will count as something like a solution.

Or we could embark on a quest for metaphysical self-knowledge supported – underpinned –by the idea that, if there is something bothering us, there is very likely something 'causing' – perpetuating – this bother, and if we could find a way to discover that cause, we might be able to resolve the problem at source. This is everyday reasoning, and it does not involve unwarranted assumptions, nor does it bias the process by invoking an ideology. It does not assume that the going will be easy, or that success is assured: it simply attempts to solve the problem on its own terms, by acknowledging it in an elemental way: something is not quite right; all I am attempting to do is make good that 'something not quite right'.

Now let's suppose that we've even managed to get this simple starting position 'wrong'. Let's suppose we've failed to

spot that the 'problem' – which somehow turns out not to be a problem – is in fact a 'mistaken perception' on our part, and that some kind philosopher from Harvard or Oxford can put us right, or that a crack on the head will bring us to our senses. Even under these circumstances, we will still be facing something of a mystery; that is to say, a mystery as to why we would mistakenly think our being is mysterious when in fact it is not. And the idea that we could dismiss this infinitely recurring mystery of mysteries as having been 'dealt with' by a bit of conceptual clarification is as trivial as the idea that physical science can, given time, explain everything: it can only explain everything to those who are insensitive to the metaphysical dimension of their being, and who never experience themselves as 'knowing lucidities' capable of existential self-reflection, with the extraordinary mixture of wonderment and dread that this entails. Metaphysical sensitivity is not related to academic intelligence or scholarly cleverness, which explains why many Nobel prize-winners, scientists, and the like, are invariably philosophically illiterate[10].

All this has been simply to say that, from whatever angle you come at it, existence presents itself – to the lucid subject – as essentially mysterious, and that nothing that can happen to us in the course of life and experience is ever going to change that, except in a very trivial and provisional way. And even if we are mistaken about the details, and have failed to articulate it properly, and really don't know what we have been talking about, the mystery of existence itself remains.

In this short article we have tried to show that the only possible meaningful ground of metaphysics is the basic existential mystery that haunts us all, and the only issues of genuine interest to metaphysics are those which grant us

objective and direct metaphysical self-knowledge. What else could metaphysics possibly be about ? What other kind of quest could be more crucial to our existential fulfilment ? And the astonishing truth is that if you were to read every single book in the western metaphysical canon[11] – the most gruesome and disheartening prospect imaginable – you won't manage to learn a single useful fact about anything, let alone facts about your essential being; nor will you even be given the least guidance as to the direction you should be heading in. Academic metaphysics is an intellectual catastrophe, and an unconscionable waste of precious time. Something is desperately wrong with our philosophical tradition, and has been from the very start, yet this shouldn't deter those who are prepared to embark on the quest for metaphysical self-knowledge: it's not that difficult, and you already have everything you need to hand in your everyday intellect and your capacity for objective self-observation.

Endnotes:

[1] This is not to say that 'eastern' (Hindu, Buddhist & Taoist) metaphysics is any better, but it helps to distinguish the western canon from other contenders.
[2] 'Mind's eye': that elusive but very real point of mental lucidity where we reflect on things, and where we get our information as to what we are experiencing.
[3] 'Knowing capacity': that innermost ability which allows us to know and to perceive anything at all; our everyday minds, in other words.
[4] 'Being' is our ongoing presence in life and experience; 'existence' is our being in its self-aware, self-reflective mode. We 'exist' to the extent that we can be reflectively self-aware of our being; simply 'being' – persisting in life – is what we do the rest of the time.
[5] 'Outside' and 'above and beyond' are just figurative expressions and should not be made too much of.

[6] Ruthless self-honesty, with no concern for what other people might think. We don't have to make our metaphysical explorations public; and in truth no one else would really be interested.
[7] The idea of 'not two' points of lucidity in our 'mind's eye' occurs in some schools of the Zen Buddhist tradition.
[8] See for example Carroll & Markosian (2014).
[9] One of the standard definitions of metaphysics is that it is concerned with 'reality', finding out what is ultimately real, but of course, everything being contested, there are others: see Moore (2013), Introduction.
[11] 'Philosophy' in the sense of a genuine interest in objective metaphysical knowledge.
[12]1 Make sure you've read everything listed in Moore (2013).

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2

Zen Buddhism, Satori, Enlightenment, & Truth

Summary: Satori Zen is of immense interest to anyone pursuing authentic metaphysical knowledge because it claims to offer an astonishingly straightforward path to full Spiritual Enlightenment. And in terms of outright simplicity and immediate applicability, there is no other spiritual technique quite like it, in any other tradition anywhere. But does it do what it claims to do ? Can you really 'power your way into heaven' by brute meditative force ? And does this then mean that satori is equivalent to Supreme Spiritual Enlightenment ? This essay will examine the key elements and claims of Satori Zen in the light of independent and objective metaphysical knowledge.

The conceptual perspective

For the purposes of this study, we are only interested in Zen insofar as it is a substantial means to spiritual knowledge. All other considerations are secondary, trivial, and of recreational value only. It does not much matter where Zen comes from, or when it originated, or what its history is. What matters is what it teaches. Who cares how scholarly accurate various Zen studies are ? Only people with nothing better to do. It's not the scholarship that counts, it's what's being said. And the situation with regard to an ordinary popular understanding of Zen is much more problematic than interested observers might be inclined to think: Zen practitioners are often highly partisan and combative, yet intellectually retarded; Zen scholars, on the other hand, tend to be dismissive of practitioners[1], believing their lack of scholarly diligence to mean they are most likely misinformed and deluded, and probably not even practicing an authentic Zen at all; though these same scholars are unable to contribute any metaphysical insights of their own to the whole process, nor are they the least interested in doing so, and their pronouncements never amount to much more than a misguided obeisance to an entirely self-serving vision of academic rectitude. It is the equivalent of a group of spectators pontificating confidently on the finer points of a game they have never played, and don't fully understand.

None of this would matter were it not for the fact that Zen, as a readily available technique anyone - given a certain level of instruction and supervision – can practice, makes provocative claims of considerable interest to those of us pursuing metaphysical knowledge and insight. It is to these claims that we want to direct our efforts.

What is Zen ?

This is not as easy a question to answer as might first appear. Zen does not refer to a single teaching, or a single spiritual practice. There are at least two main schools, Rinzai and Soto, and both approach the idea of Enlightenment from radically different standpoints. They have long been in competition with one another. And over the last hundred years, thanks to the way in which various western New Age groups have also found themselves competing for attention, Zen – as a very distinctive approach to spiritual matters - has been keen to promote an image of itself as disciplined and purposive, in contrast to the kind of mystical airy-fairyness likely to be found elsewhere. Of course all New Age groups will, at a nudge, actively denigrate their competition, but this tends to be from within a relatively easy going, relaxed and indulgent vision of what religion is supposedly all about, whereas the Zen schools are keen to be seen as hard-headed and uncompromising. Which means that representing an authentic Zen has come to be seen as an important achievement in its own right, and something active supporters can be justly proud of. Which means in turn that it is almost impossible to present a widely accepted and uncontested view as to exactly what Zen is.

Yet we can still identify its main features, focussing on those ideas we consider to be metaphysically crucial, while disregarding the rest. Zen appears to have a long and potentially contradictory and confusing history, if we approach it as a series of conflicting spiritual claims of equal value. But if we take a 'Zen approach' to Zen, and ask appropriately blunt and pointed questions, the story becomes much simpler, as well as much more metaphysically interesting and informative. Because Zen history then

becomes a matter of the extent to which each competing school is able to offer an authentic route to spiritual wisdom, as opposed to yet another merely delusory religious doctrine.

The whole saga begins in China around 500 AD, some thousand years after the time of the Buddha himself. The actual mythical and historical elements of the Zen story can be studied elsewhere[2], and they are not particularly important, if we accept and stick to the plausible idea that Buddhism arrived in China as a 'barbarian import', most likely from India, and that it underwent a series of transformative adaptations along the way. Indian verbosity, hyperbole and transcendentalism was discarded in favour of a simple practicality which sought direct answers to basic questions such as 'what is Buddhism actually proposing, and what are its practices ?' and 'what is the ultimate goal in Buddhism, and how is it to be achieved ?'

Buddhism has at its core the story of a person's quest for the ultimate in metaphysical wisdom. The legend has it that a seeker – Prince Gautama – having learned through his own grim experience the inadequacy of all forms of traditional religious teaching and practice, was forced to confront the truth of the human condition as it is, objectively and independently, without recourse to any doctrinal intermediary. He had to disregard traditional yogas and austerities and meditations, and to seek a possible solution to his spiritual predicament on its own terms. The situation looked hopeless, yet somehow, through persistent reflection, he discovered – in the depths of his mind – the special insight he had been looking for. The problem was resolved, and his searching was over. He then went on to tell people that what he had discovered was deep and profound and indescribably difficult to put into words, but that the discovery was decisive

and complete and once-for-all. He had realised the Supreme Truth about life and existence. He had thereby become the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

The story of the Buddha is, in essence, a narrative illustration of the necessity of radical renunciation – abandonment, if you like – of all received beliefs and patterns of thought about life and existence, if one is to achieve metaphysical insight and knowledge. You don't have to believe in the historical veracity of the story to appreciate its metaphysical validity. It is simply trying to tell us that one has to renounce all forms of received ideas, and habitual patterns of thought, not because they are wrong in themselves, but because they need to be radically improved upon through the attainment of insight, or wisdom. The extent to which one clings to certain conceptions is the extent to which one is trapped in a certain 'condition', the only way out of which is through the actualisation of insights which help you transcend the limitations of that condition. These insights can only be achieved through a steady and persistent independence of mind, quietly reflecting - objectively and impartially - on all aspects of our human metaphysical predicament, observing how it functions, and how it captures our attention, and how it might offer avenues of escape. These insights never come about as a result of a belief in certain doctrines, no matter how profound and penetrating and encompassing those doctrines might be, and no matter how passionately people might claim that their belief in these doctrines has helped them, because doctrines amount to the imposition of distorting mental templates on a basic and necessary clarity of mind, and on a basic and necessary clarity of intellectual sight. If you can't see your situation clearly for yourself, then all you can see is other people's thoughts about your situation, and if that's the only thing you can see, you might as well not bother looking at

anything at all. And this, when it comes down to it, seems to be a condition most people are reasonably happy to accept. In other words, people are not much interested in exploring the reality of their metaphysical situation for themselves, they are happy just to believe in one doctrine or another, and to leave it at that.

Belief and faith are the essential elements of everyday religion. Religion can only work if people are prepared, in the interests of soothing their innermost fears and anxieties, to cling on to the hope that religious practice will somehow see them right in the end. Anxiety gives rise to hope, and hope is formalised into faith and belief. Religion would have no meaning if this elemental relationship did not obtain, because religion would then simply amount to a series of speculative theories – fascinating, perhaps, and well worth taking a look at - but by no means convincing or decisive. Without a 'hopeful faith' to give it credibility, and override everyday rationality, religion would look very fanciful and strange, and likely be considered as the product of a very troubled imagination. Yet if people feel comforted by such imaginings - as they clearly do - then there is no good reason to stop them from reassuring themselves in this way, but if they are after 'the truth' – the unadorned facts of life and existence - then they need to follow a different path, and head in a quite different direction. And this different direction is what the story of the Buddha is all about, and what Buddhism ought to be trying to teach us.

But as we already know, Buddhist religion – as practiced by millions worldwide - is not a call to independence of thought and objective metaphysical observation and reflection, it is a call to Buddhist belief. Buddhism became just another religion the very moment it was formalised, and all the Buddha's good intentions were reduced – almost – to dust.

'Almost', because the Buddha's message is loud and clear in the story of the Buddha himself [3], even if not many people can be bothered to see that. How can we be sure that the essential message was reduced to dust ? Because Buddhism doesn't produce Buddhas, or even aspirant Buddhas – except nominally - it only ever produces more Buddhists, more faithful believers. And Buddhism must be content with that, otherwise it would reform itself.

Yet we have obviously cornered ourselves with something of a paradox here, because if people find themselves comforted by Buddhist beliefs, and we have already said that they should be allowed to indulge themselves - if that is the best they can do – then Buddhism should be left to go its own sweet way. But Buddhist metaphysics was meant to offer special knowledge specifically to those few who were determined to find 'the truth'; it was not meant to replace the Indian religion of its day with another variant form. That Buddhism has become something of a world religion – offering comforting doctrinal faith to the masses - only reminds us how deeply distorted and obscured its original teachings have become.

Where does all this take us ? To the interesting fact that when Indian Buddhism hit China, the Chinese set about trying to get to the point of Buddhism, in exactly the way that the Buddha would have wanted. At least, this is what D.T. Suzuki has argued[4], and it makes for an interesting historical talking point. There is certainly something about Chan, as a characteristically Chinese form of Buddhism, which is 'fundamentalist' in the best possible sense, in that it reduces the whole Buddhist project to its elements, in identifying a certain simple purposive meditation as the key method, and an enlightenment experience as the ultimate goal. That

doesn't mean that Chan got it right, but at least they tried.

And in the 12th century AD, a thousand years after its origins in China, Chan reached Japan, where it began to evolve into what we now know of as Zen. And a thousand years after that, in the early 20th century, Zen reached the West. And by that time, 'Zen' had long since become an umbrella term which covered at least two major and separate schools of thought, Rinzai and Soto, which, though both emphasised formal sitting meditation, had very different ways of defining 'Enlightenment'. Without going into details, Rinzai has emphasised a very particular, sudden, distinctive, transformative cosmic experience called 'satori' – described as 'sudden enlightenment' – whereas Soto believes that we are already enlightened, and that our everyday experience is an ongoing manifestation, and confirmation, of it. So formal sitting meditation in Soto was conceived of as a kind of symbolic testament to your already existing enlightenment, and it basically adds nothing to the sum of metaphysical insight which you already possess, which, if Soto sounds credible to you, is no insight at all. The self-contradictory absurdity of Soto is plain to anyone capable of even a rudimentary scepticism, but the very existence of it as a tradition is an important illustration of how some people can be lured into accepting metaphysical nonsense if it is presented to them in a way which makes them think it might actually be quite profound. This is because they are not interested in exploring metaphysical reality for themselves - they feel more comfortable embracing and then hotly defending[5] a specious creed that celebrates both doublethink and intellectual imbecility.

It might appear that we are now arguing for the 'superiority' of Rinzai Zen over Soto, insofar as Rinzai has a substantial and distinctive feature – satori - to promote, whereas Soto is no more than a delusional fellowship of fools

sitting around wasting their lives. Would that it were that simple. The truth is that Rinzai – with a highly formalised system of koans and mondo[6] – is effectively as vacuous and theatrical as Soto, and can no more deliver satori to its aspirants than a casual yoga class which throws in a few minutes silent meditation at the end of all the posturing. Because Rinzai practitioners soon learn how to play the Zen game, and how to speak in fatuous gibberish, and how to blurt out supposedly spontaneous – but in fact highly stylised – responses to supposedly searching mondo questions[7], making the whole undertaking a monstrous charade, with gormless teachers leading gullible students in what amounts to no more than playroom antics. If the quest for metaphysical wisdom is reducible to this sort of thing, what hope for those questers starting out who really want to learn something ?

But if workaday Zen – irrespective of the school - is an instance of religious theatre for those who can't be bothered to explore things for themselves, this does not mean that no one ever achieved anything through Zen practice. Some have clearly found exactly what they were looking for. Strange and wonderful experiences are definitely there to be had, and there is a wealth of believable testimony to this effect. And it is well worth our taking a hard look at examples of this testimony and judging them in an objective way, as a means of increasing our insight into Zen mysticism, both Soto and Rinzai.

What is 'satori' ?

As we have seen, Zen amounts to something of a fundamentalist reworking of Buddhist principles, reducing everything to a bare minimum, with a minimal technique – sitting meditation – and minimal doctrine – achieving Enlightenment. This is true of both the Rinzai and Soto

schools, although with Soto there is nothing to do but 'sit', and with Rinzai there is a supposed advance towards satori.

And as we have also tried to make clear, Zen is – in practice – no more than a form of religious theatre, with a great deal of silly roleplaying by all concerned, staff and students. This is of course true of all human activity, from law to medicine to the police, and is not restricted to those pretending to seek enlightenment. But if we disregard all the stupidity and concentrate instead on those who have actually had mystical experiences as a result of their Zen practice, we end up in a considerably more interesting situation.

Mystical experiences used to be very rare phenomena, and were largely confined to those who had made a commitment to a strictly religious life. But after the advent of New Age religious thinking in the late 1960s, and the massive amount of spiritual experimentation – and drug taking - that grew out of it, genuine mystical experiences became much more common, and this time they were not contextualised by traditional religion and monasticism. It was as if merely being open to the possibility of mystical revelation – an attitude strongly encouraged and endorsed by all the New Age religions - increased the likelihood of such an experience exponentially, and so the floodgates opened. Some accounts of such experiences may have been fictional and designed only to impress, but many were not.

What is meant here by a mystical experience ? This would be any type of strong, emotionally-based and overwhelming inward sense – an inward experiential perception – of something beyond one's ordinary, everyday objective sense of self, and objective everyday experiential possibilities. It would be an intense subjective experience of a

'something beyond' one's ordinary state of being, and often extending outwards to include the cosmos as a whole, yet mysteriously including the cosmos as an intimate part of oneself. Yet it is not the subjective intensity of the experience which is mystical, it is the way such experiences seem to testify to the reality of a transcendental 'force', or a 'presence', or a 'power', or 'state' beyond the ordinary, which somehow connects, as it were, the ordinary self to a very much greater cosmic Self.

Mystical experiences are invariably – though not always - viewed as intensely positive, and euphoric, and, for the time that they last, cosmically and intellectually decisive. They seem to answer all the questions one could possibly ask, as well as many one hadn't even thought of. One's sense of cosmic abandonment is obliterated, and a whole range of unforeseen – and unimagined - inner vistas reveal themselves, and one feels oneself, albeit briefly, to be the ruler of all one surveys. Everything is in your mind, and your mind is in everything. Everything has a place, and is perfect in itself, and nothing remains to be done. Nothing can be added to, or subtracted from, this perfection, and you really believe you have reached the end of the spiritual road. And everything is permeated by a divine cosmic love.

At least, this is how mystical experiences are experienced, especially in their full intensity. In their positive guise, they very much conform to recognisable patterns, and these patterns are easily identified by those who have already experienced them. They may seem to be ineffable and indescribable, but mystics have no trouble recognising them in others.

Even more surprisingly, mystical experiences can be

categorised according to their flavour. There is at one extreme an intoxicating, rapturous, overwhelming variety; and there is at the other a clear-headed, cerebral, and intellectual sort. There are slow, insidious and longlasting versions, and there are sudden, momentary and elusive ones. There is a deeply-satisfying variety, and a deeply perplexing one. There are all sorts of experiences for all occasions, and for all character types.

Where does satori fit into all this ? In a word, satori is a very distinctive type of mystical experience, brought about, and promoted, by a very particular meditative technique, and a very particular mental context. Satori is characterised by a sudden, explosive, inner perceptual transformation, connecting the everyday self to the larger Self underling the cosmos, and this experience is usually accompanied by a surprisingly clear-headed euphoria, and a powerful sense of certainty. And it is this sense of certainty that gives the Zen practitioner the confidence to answer the nonsense exchanges of mondo without hesitation, and validate their attainment in being able so to do.

Satori is not that easily achieved, but the mental brutality of a traditional Rinzai Zen setting - in the hands of an experienced satori-realised master - is certainly conducive to it. It is a 'do or die' environment – either you achieve satori or you have failed. Your mind is pushed to its limits - and beyond - in a refined form of physical, mental and spiritual torture, as a kind of ongoing meditative Russian roulette, in the hope that satori will rescue you from further mental horror with its longed-for arrival. You might be lucky, or you might not, and some people literally lose their minds in the process. Traditional Rinzai satori Zen is not recommended for the faint-hearted, or for the sensitive soul. In fact, it oughtn't to be

recommended to anyone, as the whole nightmarish process is all quite unnecessary. If you want metaphysical insight you can just sit comfortably somewhere with a pad and pen and do some serious thinking. It will take time, but you don't have to undergo mental and physical torture to get the insights you need.

Not all meditation is of the Rinzai Zen variety. There are many other kinds of purposive meditation, involving all kinds of imaginative possibilities. Yogic mystical meditation, for example, whether Indian or Tibetan, doesn't lead to satori, or to any kind of sudden intellectual realisation, and with good reason. Yogic explorations operate according to different intuitive principles, and are intent on very different and far more rapturous experiential states. Satori Zen prizes a clear head and a functioning intellect, whereas yoga and Tantra are looking for deeply immersive modifications of experiencing, leading to what they believe will be a permanent state of transcendental divine consciousness. It doesn't often work out that way, and tends to lead only to a schizophrenic self-absorption, but that's what they are trying to do. Zen is inherently restrained in its ethos, built on total self-denial, whereas yoga and Tantra are mystically Dionysian.

Satori, then, is a very particular experiential achievement, arising out of a very specific type of meditative quest. Doctrinally though, in Zen, satori is viewed as the same as the Buddha's Enlightenment, and is therefore equivalent to Supreme Metaphysical Wisdom, beyond which no further wisdom is either necessary, or possible.

But is this true ? Is a satori-realised person a Buddha ? To answer this we need to have at least a working idea of what would qualify as Supreme Spiritual Enlightenment, even if

only a definition by default, based on what we can plainly see it is not.

What is Spiritual Enlightenment ?

'Enlightenment' as an idea simply represents an imagined endpoint in a spiritual quest, a vaguely intuited objective without real content. The more one thinks about Spiritual Enlightenment, the less one can imagine it, or conceptualise it. And if one is serious about metaphysical knowledge, one has sooner or later to acknowledge that postulating an endpoint to one's questing can never be more than a conceptual 'device', a mere construct designed to help give intellectual shape and coherence to one's direction. Any supposed content to the idea of 'Enlightenment' can really only be based on imaginings which, as soon as you try to substantiate them, turn out to be quite meaningless.

Of course one can't help but indulge in metaphysical fantasy, and imagine Supreme Spiritual Enlightenment as a combination of permanent omniscience and unassailable wellbeing. Then you tend to move on to think about the things that you will put right in your life, and how you will use your enjoyable 'omniscience' to enhance your situation, perhaps to get to work on your bucket list, and buy yourself a few nice things, and all the rest of it. This type of silliness is unavoidable, at least in the early stages of one's metaphysical quest, and it demonstrates how, when all is said and done, we are unable even to imagine ourselves free of our condition, because we always return to some grossly material and vaguely adolescent ideas of what authentic metaphysical knowledge will do for us. But the fact is that the quest for metaphysical wisdom takes you to a different order of knowledge, where worldly significance no longer obtains, and

this is very difficult to appreciate when your imagination is only ever able to supply you with imagery of worldly advancement.

And this line of thought can even put some people off the search for spiritual wisdom altogether, because they feel that if they can't use their wisdom to advance and enhance their situation, what's the point ? Why bother ? Yet in facing this paradox – of 'worthless knowledge of supreme worth' – you can take the opportunity to try to grasp - as well as to accommodate yourself, however badly, to it in the process - the important fact that the direction of travel is not really in your hands, and that metaphysical knowledge is not only not yours to play with, it also has a dynamic of its own which is not necessarily to your liking. Well forget it then, might come the reply, but if the yearning for metaphysical knowledge and wisdom is awake in you, you won't be able to disregard it, and forget it, even if you think you might want to. And even if you can see that it is not going to benefit you materially, or psychologically, or socially: that's not what genuine wisdom is about.

This does not then mean that an imperfect, selfish and obviously flawed idea of Enlightenment is either worthless or completely fictitious. In fact, from the perspective of a demanding and enquiring mind, it is extremely useful, in that it acts as a constant reminder how far there still is for you to travel, and how much remains to be investigated. And the more one explores one's metaphysical condition, objectively and impartially, the harder it becomes to imagine what Enlightenment could possibly be, and the more one comes to question whether anything like it could possibly exist in the first place.

Which brings us on to testimony[8]. There are various

people, all over the world, who claim to be spiritually 'enlightened', and therefore to have reached a state of spiritual perfection. Such claims are always worth taking seriously, and worth investigating, as a matter of genuine human interest. And they can be judged, reasonably straightforwardly, at two levels: one, using simple, everyday methods of objective intellectual discrimination; and two, in the light of one's own authentic efforts at achieving metaphysical knowledge and insight. In the first, one assesses the situation in terms of motive, egotism, evidence of delusion, intellectual coherence, and the like. A strong measure of unsentimental objectivity is called for here, because we all tend to overlook a multitude of patently obvious defects in the people we respect, for our own foolish and selfish reasons. Most of the time it doesn't much matter, it's a forgivable weakness, but here we are talking about our spiritual destiny, and in this regard we really need to put in a bit more effort. For example, we pretend to ourselves that our guru is not a vain, lazy, stupid, overweight, egomaniacal idiot, with the spiritual insight of a selfish five-year-old, even when everything he says and does proves it, and the evidence is as clear as daylight, because we don't want to face the fact that our judgement in these matters is lamentable. Because facing that would then force us to confront a situation we don't feel equipped or qualified to. We find it difficult – impossible - to work out who's telling the spiritual truth, so we just go with what we like the sound of. And if it starts to dawn on us that we might have made a mistake, we would rather deny the facts than have the inconvenience of having to start all over again, and having to find another circle of friends, and having to cancel two weeks meditational retreat in the country. But if you're seriously interested in metaphysical knowledge, you need to find a way of grounding yourself so that you can face the truth of spiritual charlatans without feeling any sense of desperate inner

confusion and anxiety. Don't tie yourself to a spiritual master or to a group or even to a religion: learn to stand on your own two feet, and develop your own judgement. In fact, don't bother with a master at all: the chances of finding one who knows what they're talking about is zero.

The second form of assessment is obviously more complex, and considerably more demanding than the first. You need to have done some of your spiritual and metaphysical homework, so that you can at least begin to judge certain spiritual claims on their own merits. If someone claims to be enlightened, then assess their claims in the light of what enlightenment would mean by the highest possible standards, standards many times higher than those you might be prepared to accept right now. Authority and status count for nothing when it comes to the quest for metaphysical knowledge, because human beings are easily impressed by appearances, when they ought to look much deeper. Also - as a matter of absolutely fundamental mundane wisdom - you should get used to the idea that people in authority – society figures of great standing – are invariably, beneath the impressive façade, cowardly, stupid, and vain, and their achievements are totally unwarranted. Of course there are exceptions, but you will probably never come across one.

And when it comes to metaphysical knowledge, humans play exactly the same game as they would in any form of show business, basking in the adoration, and letting it go to their heads. As a rule of thumb, it can even be said that authentic metaphysical knowledge, to the extent that it is transforming you, will push you away from making extravagant claims as to your achievements, because you are able to see, with your own eyes, that it is of a completely different order from that of worldly success, however you

might measure such success. Saving the planet, and ushering in a new era of peace, happiness and compassion, is for simpletons and egomaniacs, and for those who have not yet received an inkling as to which direction they ought to be heading in, not for those who are serious about spiritual wisdom. Fortunately human destiny is not in the hands of us humans, otherwise we would all be doomed.

Where does all this take us ? To the important conclusion that you have to set your own standards as to what would 'constitute Spiritual Enlightenment', and disregard what anyone and everyone else has to say. You have to find a way to establish totally objective criteria for what would necessarily be a 'key event', even if the term 'key event' is quite inadequate to describe and contain what you might be heading towards. And these objective criteria have to be independent of your likes and dislikes, and the likes and dislikes of the rest of the world, otherwise you can be sure that you will prejudice your judgements. Spiritual Enlightenment is not necessarily big or small, earth-shattering or trivial, mundane or extraordinary, delightful or horrible: these are human terms for human characterisations of human-interest events, and the point is not to make your task more difficult by misrepresenting the spiritual wisdom you seek by reducing it to something of importance to the world at large. You have to make room in your mind for an empty expectancy – an expectant observing, yet expecting nothing – while keeping it clear of imaginings. Spiritual Enlightenment may never come, but if it appears to come in the form of something your mind can comprehend – even if you would be tempted to characterise it as 'incomprehensible' - then you can be sure that it is yet another false dawn.

As always, a discussion of this kind threatens to slide

into nonsense, as it heads towards the edge of rational comprehensibility, yet there is good reason for taking the time and effort to think the key points through carefully. At the core of any possible spiritual illumination is the intellect – our ordinary, familiar and unsurprising capacity to assess and discriminate – though not the intellect in its raw and untrained state as the mere capacity to overthink and get bogged down in repetitive and obsessive trivia, but rather in its most inquiring and perspicacious mode as that capacity which, when fully mature, and fully extended through persistent metaphysical inquiry and impartial observation, is capable of delivering a verdict on whatever is presented to it, whatever form that presentation might take. We can portray this capacity as something like a basic triangulation between evidence presented to the intellect, intellectual observation and assessment, and intellectual judgement.

And perhaps the most interesting features of any intellectual judgement – when it assesses metaphysical significance - is the fact that, despite whatever evidence may be presented to it, it invariably decides, in time, that nothing is quite good enough, and that something is always missing, even from something which appears, to all intents and purposes, to be the ultimate of its kind. In other words, given time, and given space, the intellect always rejects as inadequate whatever you present it with, no matter how wonderful, satisfying and perfect that thing might be. The intellect can always find a flaw with anything, because it knows in its innermost ability that anything graspable or apprehensible or perceivable in any way, is essentially – inherently - less than the intellect itself, and therefore not worthy of finality, and of supreme perfection.

Which means that, when it comes to Spiritual

Enlightenment, only that which cannot be disregarded by the intellect will be good enough to satisfy it. So what, in all of experience, good and bad, high and low, subtle and gross, could fulfil such a criterion ? Nothing, obviously: no kind of experience, no kind of thought, no kind of identifiable entity, no kind of perception, no kind of identifiable capacity. Spiritual Enlightenment cannot entail anything apprehensible. So all the accounts of Enlightenment in terms of this or that experience – whether subtle, cosmic, divine, indescribable, wondrous, non-dual, permanent, sudden, or whatever – can be disregarded as mistaken.

But why do people endlessly make this kind of basic error ? Because they haven't set themselves standards, and they haven't done their metaphysical homework: they simply grab hold of the first 'altered state' that comes their way, luxuriate in its glory, and declare themselves sanctified. They have no interest in knowledge or insight, only in some kind of spiritual currency, and being the proud recipient of an altered state fits that bill nicely. Then, if you want to become a guru, you learn how to perform in public, making it up as you go along, pinching useful phrases from those already ahead of you in the game, and the rest will take care of itself. No one is going to come out of the crowd and question your worth, and if they do, you can gently humiliate them in front of your followers, who will be eager to laugh at your self-serving jokes.

Is 'satori' Spiritual Enlightenment ?

In line with what has been said, no, it is not. Not even close. How could it be ? Satori is just a very powerful mystical experience, not to be denied, doubted or taken lightly, but it is no more the Supreme Truth – the supreme insight into insight - than a magnificent landscape, or a nuclear holocaust. Just because it is intense, and revelatory, and positive, doesn't

mean that it is anything other than an intense, revelatory and positive experience. Anything apprehensible or experienceable is not Enlightenment. Enlightenment is of a different order of insight altogether.

And there is more. Striving for satori in a traditional Rinzai setting, with monastic discipline, keisaku[9] blows, intense sesshins[10], and mystifying mondos, is, for any westerner with a flexible, agile, educated and inquiring mind, asking for real trouble. Satori Zen is a form of torture, combining sleep deprivation, physical and mental pain with sensory deprivation, and all specifically designed to push you over a mental cliff; and it would take a very unusual kind of psychological makeup to thrive in such an environment. You would have to be made of steel. And what for ? If you pursue the path of metaphysical knowledge, you get to realise that intense, transformative and revelatory experiences are no more intrinsically significant than mundane, trivial and uninformative ones, and that our instinctive human desire for something cosmic and wonderful is just a siren call to nowhere in particular. This is not to deny cosmic consciousness, or divine rapture, or the unio mystica – all these are real experiences, anyone can have them, given the right circumstances - it is instead to deny their metaphysical significance. They are simply intense experiences – altered states of consciousness – which tend to get accorded special significance by those who have them, because they are unusual and intense. Yet in terms of a source of metaphysical insight, they are really not that important; they are just things that happen to some people some of the time, and it is a mistake to think they are more than that.

The New Age[11] response

There will be many New Age mystics who, if presented with this whole discussion, will respond by saying that they've known for decades that satori is not enlightenment, and that they've long since reconceptualised the whole issue. There are books to this effect, and they've been in the public domain for some time. There is also a doctrinal acknowledgement in Zen itself about this[12], so the subject is well-known. It has been dealt with, they would say.

But before analysing their response in detail, it is important to put the whole New Age spiritual movement into perspective. We have to remember that until the mid-20th century, mystical spirituality was the exclusive preserve of traditional religion, and that it was extremely difficult to get hold of mystical doctrines, and accounts of mystical experiences. Mysticism was, in effect, secret knowledge, and you had to work hard to get anywhere near it. You had to go to unknown libraries and spend days there hunting through dusty stacks, so that you could take out books that no one else had ever taken out, because no one else even knew these books existed. But come the social revolution of the 1960s, and the ubiquity of Hindu and Buddhist missionaries from the East, combined with a real thirst for all things esoteric, mystical experiences where everywhere to be had. There was a genuine continuum from drug taking to yoga classes to reading the Tibetan Book of the Dead to eating wholefood or to just immersing yourself in the new Bohemia. People really wanted to be on a cosmic, mystical high.

Over the decades New Age thinking has become more formalised, and more organised, and more competitive, but certainly no less mystical. Spiritual luminaries are

everywhere, and they're offering a fast track to Enlightenment. Esoteric doctrines have been streamlined, and modernised, and adapted to appeal to modern sensibilities, and made as user-friendly as possible. And thanks to the wonders of the internet, you can now, in a matter of minutes, be certified a Sufi mystic, or a Tibetan Buddhist, or a Kriya Yogi, or a Red Indian shaman. There is something for everyone, so no excuse for not attending to your spiritual self.

This has all been very good news for anyone interested in authentic metaphysical knowledge because the spiritual marketplace is well out in the open, and you don't have to feel under any obligation. You can pick and choose at will. And you can change your mind as often as you like. It's simply a matter of trying things out. The only problem with all this – and the problem will increase with the passage of time – is that ease of access to esoterica means that no one appreciates the fact that genuine metaphysical insight is extremely hard to come by. It is not to be had by merely signing up for some classes, or going on a weekend retreat. You have to put in some serious work. It takes decades to clarify even the basics, unless you are super special, and most of us are not. Being able to buy books on esoteric doctrines and obscure scriptures is only the first of many steps, and of itself doesn't guarantee anything. We have to understand that it was not 'the authorities' that made advanced spiritual knowledge a rarity, it was the fact that advanced spiritual knowledge is a genuine rarity in itself, and just not that easy to achieve at the best of times, despite the fact that many hundreds of gurus claim to be enlightened, and have uploaded grotesque self-aggrandising videos on YouTube to prove it.

So we now have a New Age spiritual mentality which is decidedly casual about advanced spirituality, and reaching

the highest forms of wisdom. Everything has become so easy, so available. The planet can be saved, Enlightenment can be had, and life seems to be getting better and better. And nothing to stop you writing a book, or making a video. All of which means the evidence is out there, unrestricted, for anyone interested to take a look at, and come to a conclusion about.

'Supreme Enlightenment' as a bit of a disappointment

And the evidence is that the idea of Supreme Spiritual Enlightenment has confused a lot of the big names - the New Age gurus - and put them on the back foot. Accounts differ widely in the detail, but the logic remains the same in every case. Yes, all the big names are fully Enlightened, no question about that, but there seems to be something inherently wrong with the Enlightened 'state' itself, and it has not lived up to its billing. In fact, Enlightenment has turned out to be a great disappointment. Something really not quite right. So the big names have put their mystically-infused New Age intelligence to the task, and come up with a solution: Enlightenment on its own is not enough; it must be combined with spiritual living, and then the equation will be perfectly balanced. Spiritual wisdom + a spiritual lifestyle, meaning you need to understand in advance that after your Supreme Enlightenment, you will still need to 'practice'. You will still need to practice your meditation, and your mindfulness, and your compassionate thoughts; you will still need to join your local social groups, so as to save the planet, and humanity. You will have to carry on as before, only this time glowing with compassion and wisdom.

What does this tell us ? Quite a number of interesting

things. To begin with, it tell us New Agers have very much felt the need, right from the start, for some sort of 'ultimate' concept which would underpin, and validate, their spiritual achievements. You need to be able to say 'I've gone as far as it is possible for anyone to go, so I'm Enlightened', rather than 'I'm still on the journey', because an intermediate status won't allow you the make decisive pronouncements as to what is what. Worse still, an intermediate position is always under threat from a higher position, so some grizzled yogi emerging from a cave – or more likely some glib Californian emerging from a TV studio - might be able to destroy your status by claiming that there are still higher realms than those you have managed to reach. Scientology, for one, has been prepared to add new Operating Thetan levels to the top of their special knowledge tree whenever they believed they had discovered them[13], and will probably continue to do so, why not. Competitive spirituality is not as uncommon as you might think[14], even though it is frowned upon, as we humble and ignorant seekers are all meant to be a part of one big mutually supportive family.

If we accept the need for a supreme, definitive spiritual realisation - some sort of decisive experience - how do we know when we have reached it ? This is well worth assessing objectively, and following it to the bitter end. It says much about the total lack of exigence characteristic of all New Age mysticism. Because it turns out, when you drill through the self-justifying fluff, that your decision about the quality of your realisation is entirely – entirely – dependent on how convincing it feels to you. In other words, if your mystical experience contains a strong sense of certainty and finality, then that is what it must be, surely. If it tells you, 'this is it', and feels like it as well, then you can be sure that you've got that right[15]. If you see God, then what you see actually *is* God, not

your mind playing tricks.

We could try to get round the gaping elephant trap of self-justification by introducing the concept of 'validation'. Under the old Catholic system, you had to have your experiences investigated by your superior. If he or she was jealous and vindictive – a genuine occupational hazard[16] - you could well be told you were wrong, and that what you had experienced was not God, but probably the Devil. In Rinzai Zen, you are expected to check your satori with your master, who will ask you searching questions. If you answer swiftly and confidently, regardless of what you may say, you will probably get the 'all clear', and a paper certificate to go with it. In Hinduism, past and present, if you make mystical claims of any kind, that alone is often enough to justify your elevation to the status of a divine oracle. Robert Forman for example, a Transcendental Meditation practitioner, asked his long-time friend and fellow mystic Richard 'Ram Dass' Alpert to confirm his enlightenment, and Dass, after asking some key questions, was able to oblige[17]. That's that sorted, then. It's a complete mockery of the whole quest for definitive spiritual insight if you need to ask someone else what you yourself are up to.

Neither system of mystical judgement – whether New Age or traditional – is of much direct help to us here, because it doesn't even attempt to solve the problem at the heart of the human metaphysical predicament, namely, how could you know – objectively – that what you are experiencing, or witnessing, or cognising, is exactly what it is, and not something distorted by your subjective grasp of it ? In other words, how can you know objectively what you know subjectively ? And is what you think you know subjectively what you *need* to know ? Is it the truth ? What is 'the truth' ? The predicament of consciousness looks to be an impossible

mess, and it is not even remotely solved either by having a mystical experienced permeated by a heavy conviction of certainty, or validated by one of your friends. How could it be ?

The other key advantage to undergoing a specific - or nearly specific - revelatory mystical experience is that you can tell others about it, and gain status thereby. You can go on television and proclaim yourself, and make reference to a series of events which would, by some sort of common consent, mean that you were now party to secret, transcendental, cosmic knowledge. Not being able to point to a specific event, or series of events, doesn't make for a good narrative and, in the New Age discourse, means you don't have anything particularly interesting to share. It means you only have your 'ideas', and anyone can claim to have spiritual ideas. New Age mystics are therefore invariably able to recount an easily understandable chronicle of their transition from ordinary Joe, via difficult times, involving drugs and drink and promiscuity, to a realised soul[18].

Once again, this is not to deny that many people have had transformative and decisive mystical experiences; it is simply to try to work out what they amount to. And the more we investigate, the more often we see that these experiences never amount to more than intense changes in consciousness – altered states, in other words – which, although they may be accompanied by all sorts of rapturous thoughts of finality, divine wisdom, cosmic love and all the rest, don't stand up to any kind of scrutiny, and, what's worse, don't even fully satisfy the people who underwent them. As Robert Forman put it, 'Enlightenment ain't what it's cracked up to be'.[19] Jack Kornfield titled a book of his 'After the Ecstasy, the Laundry'[20], and Jed McKenna has quoted Ramesh Balsekar[21] to this effect:

'If you have the choice between enlightenment and a million dollars, take the million dollars! Because if you get the million dollars, there will be somebody there to enjoy the million dollars; but if you get enlightenment there's no one there to enjoy the enlightenment.' before adding, 'The first thing to understand about the term Spiritual Enlightenment is that it's a clunker. (The term, not the state, though the state has nothing to recommend it either.) No one actually in this state would ever have decided to call it Spiritual Enlightenment, yet no other state merits such a title.'[22]

So what we have in the case of Zen is a crucial state – satori – and in the case of New Age mystics crucial mystical experiences, and in the case of McKenna an 'Abiding Non-dual Awareness'[23], and in the case of other mystics all kinds of other states, experiences, consciousnesses, events and so on. These states are meant to represent an endpoint, a decisive conclusion, a final resting place, yet those who have 'managed it' are disappointed, and inclined to disparage what they discover. Does this make sense ? Can you reach the ultimate only to find that it is not the ultimate ? Can you reach the end of the road only to find there is more road ahead ? Not if you've bothered to do some of your basic homework.

'Practice' as the solution

And having discovered they've been following the wrong map – or most likely no map at all – our happy-go-lucky mystics, rather than trying to find out where they went wrong to begin with, have decided that a repetition of their initial experiences is what is called for, though it should now be combined with 'practice'. 'Practice' basically means subscribing to a New Age prospectus whereby you commit yourself to saving the planet, and to advancing human

spirituality, and to sending out waves of loving compassion to the furthest ends of the universe.

Now the need to resort to a concept of 'practice' – as we've described it here – is both an admission of defeat - meaning a failure to somehow realise and thereby 'secure' an ultimate metaphysical insight which could decisively and permanently sustain itself without recourse to the vagaries of life and existence – as well as an indication of the triumph of a sentimental, humanistic, and altogether adolescent idea as to what, in the end, constitutes both a fulfilled and meaningful life, and metaphysical enlightenment itself. It's like saying that you can only achieve adulthood by remaining a child. In other words, having to 'underpin' or 'supplement' Supreme Enlightenment with the clunking idea of 'practice' – meaning a return to the wholefood, ecofriendly, enthusiastically concerned world of the spiritually 'Integral'[24] citizen – is really the equivalent of saying that you've failed dismally, and that metaphysical exploration hasn't advanced your insight at all, and that you are still a beginner, even though you've somehow also achieved Supreme Spiritual Enlightenment along the way. All thanks to that ecstatic kensho[25] that hit you as you were putting on your shoes. It doesn't make sense.

For anyone with a demanding, inquiring and independent mind, encouraged and strengthened by decades of reflective thought, the idea of 'Enlightenment + practice' would be a most pitiable and unconscionable outcome to the whole metaphysical project. It would be the triumph of the kind of infantilism that the quest for metaphysical knowledge is trying to improve upon in the first place, and an endorsement of every kind of sentimental silliness that has characterised counter-cultural thinking since the 1960s: all you need is love; love until it hurts[26], and all the rest of it. You

go into metaphysics to try to transcend this kind of juvenile hippy-mindedness, not glory in it.

For example, a few minutes concentrated thinking, now and then, will soon tell anyone that taking seriously the idea of saving the world is a waste of time, and completely futile, not because it's not a worthy ideal – which obviously it is – but because you can't know – ever – which bits to save, and which bits to discard. We all try to do our best, but that's as far as it goes, because nobody knows how things will turn out. What if global warming - to take one instance – turns out to be the best thing that's ever happened to the planet, and results in millennia of storm free settled weather, causing deserts to bloom, and plants to grown like they never have before, and the seas to flourish, and the air to be the cleanest it has ever been ? No one – not even an omniscient being - will ever know the unintended outcomes of the heavily intended paths of action we take. This is the way of things, and it always will be, and no amount of mystical input is ever going to change that. That doesn't mean that we oughtn't to do what we think is best – we have no choice but to do that - but it does mean that we oughtn't to delude ourselves that this means we know how things are going to turn out. The unfolding of the universe is not under human control; never has been, never will be. It's just plain daft to think otherwise; no great insight required.

And even more to the point, what if the entire world became utterly selfless and holy and compassionate ? Would we all get instantly absorbed into a colourless, flavourless spiritual mush, with nothing to react to ? Certainly sounds like it. And we would surely all die of boredom in the first few hours of this tedious and dreadful New Order. What would life be without something negative to fight against ? Let's face it,

you don't have to be a genius to be able to entertain simple thoughts like these, and to be inspired to think further along the same lines.

We have ended up in a situation where New Age mysticism is facilitating mystical experiences in large numbers of people, and the transformative intensity of these experiences is making at least some of these people believe they have been Enlightened. Something like this has always been the stated intention of Rinzai Zen, which has perfected what it believes is an effective Enlightenment technique, combining formal meditation with mondo. And New Age mystics – Zen trained or otherwise - are relatively easily able compare their experiences with those of others, decide the currency value of their own, and come to a decision as to where they want to place themselves in an overall spiritual hierarchy. Yet even if they place themselves near the top of the pyramid, and declare themselves Enlightened, something still seems to be missing, and Supreme Spiritual Enlightenment turns out to be a damp squib. Amazing. And instead of returning to the drawing board and looking harder and deeper at the metaphysical realities of the situation they are in, and giving themselves a chance to rethink what obviously went wrong, they go straight back to their mystical roots, determined for more of the same. This ongoing participation in the very misjudgements and false trails that led them astray in the first place, is now called 'practice'.

Then where do we go from here ?

Spiritual Enlightenment is hard work, and elusive, and mysterious. It is 'real' in the best sense of the term, and is not an imaginary fiction. It goes beyond apprehensibility as we normally understand it, and so is almost impossible to specify

and label. It is something you have to work towards, and will not happen by accident. It goes beyond conceptualisation and fantasy. It is a function of transcendental insight, not of experiential modification. This is the crucial fact you learn by trial and error. It has nothing to do with altered states of consciousness - that is, unusual states of consciousness - even though all of religious mysticism, traditional and New Age, predicates itself wholly on such states. All the famous mystics in history, from St John of the Cross, to St Teresa and beyond - with the single exception of Meister Eckhart[27] - have fallen into the trap of believing that their altered states were metaphysically significant, when in fact they were no more than 'unusual' experiences dependent on the distortion of certain rather ordinary experiential capacities, and not messages from beyond. If you stay awake for many days, eating badly and punishing yourself with religious torment, who knows what your mind will come up with ? And if you experience divine visions, you will surely, if you are mystically inclined, be convinced you have opened up a hot line to cosmic consciousness, but you could just as easily achieve the same psychedelic effect by taking psychotropic drugs[28], or by catching a brain damaging virus.

These conclusions may be very hard to take for those who have convinced themselves of the value of certain New Age practices - from meditation, to mindfulness – but these conclusions will, at the same time, also have a certain basic commonsensical and level-headed feel to them. They are, in a way, kind of obvious, if you take the trouble to work through the ideas they contain. The problem is that New Age religion is wholly mystical, and not given to objective and impartial self-analysis. New Agers want to believe that their special experiences are important and revelatory and divinely instigated, not that they can be achieved by mechanical means,

and are not especially meaningful in themselves.

And as we have seen, satori is one such mystical experience, achievable – though by no means guaranteed – by means of Rinzai Zen technique. Other mystical experiences, just as intense and transformative and extraordinary, are achievable by other means, say through intense prayer, or fasting, or meditation. Put yourself through a series of demanding, mentally disturbing practices, and you will probably get a result. But if all that is normally understood to be spiritually revelatory is simple mystical – psycho-physical - 'cause and effect', what on earth do we do to find authentic spiritual knowledge ? Where on earth do we look ?

An independent quest for an objective 'Truth'

The whole phrase may sound very pretentious, and affected, and faintly ridiculous, but it is not. There is nothing to be embarrassed about in wanting to know what the hell is going on with life and existence. And all aspects of such a quest can be kept very simple and straightforward, and unassuming, and with no worldly currency to them at all. In other words, for what it's worth – and in material, substantive and worldly terms, that would be nothing at all – the search for authentic metaphysical truth can be kept a private matter, and quite detached from the public arena. Nobody needs to know. Let the saints and the swamis and beautiful people parade themselves; you can keep this to yourself.

If you want to know where to begin with metaphysics – which is simply a heavyweight term for the careful observation and appreciation of those capacities of your being which inform you not only as to 'what you are' but also as to 'what's going on' – you have to learn to turn your attention to your 'thinking mind', and your 'mind's eye'. Everything that

you know, as well as everything that you don't know, is presented to you by your mind. Your mind also presents 'you' to you. Yet it is difficult to tell exactly which bit is which. And why so confusing ? But even confusion is presented to you by your mind, with absolutely nothing left out. Find a bit that has been left out, and you will find that your mind has presented that to you as well. Everything is always all there, all the time, right in front of you.

But metaphysical confusion, that is to say, our lack of clear knowledge as to what we really are, and what we amount to, and what experience is all about, and what our destiny is, is real, and genuine, and not an imaginary state. How exactly do we tackle it ? By working slowly through the information that we have at our disposal, and reflecting on it, and trying to see how the whole thing – that is, the whole of our basic experiential capacity – holds together, and how it does what it does, and how it inform us about our experiencing. The information in question here is that which is provided to us as a result of our own direct observation of our own experience, and not ideas which have been given to us by other people. We have to learn to see what our own mind's eye tells us directly, and not have it mediated through other people's ideas, otherwise we are not exploring our reality directly, we are exploring it secondhand, through conceptual templates. Now of course exploring things through conceptual templates does constitute a reality of its own, and this is a separate and fascinating issue on its own terms, but suffice to say at this stage that it does not lead to direct insight, but only to mediated insight. You don't need other people's ideas to see what your own mind tells you; and in just the same way you don't need someone to tell you what your own eyes see.

And it is insight – direct insight - into the workings of

our own experiential matrix - that is to say, our own manifest experiential capacity - which is the path to metaphysical knowledge, and ultimately to Spiritual Enlightenment. Metaphysical insight will not deliver Spiritual Enlightenment of its own accord, but it is the path to it, and the more one pursues metaphysical knowledge, the more it will validate itself in the achievement of insights into our human condition, as well as confirming how mistaken it is to follow a religious path in which everything is inherently distorted by received ideas, many of which are wholly false in the first place. This is why the story of the Buddha so clearly illustrates the need to abandon received ideas and learn to think for ourselves.

Conclusion and summary

Satori Zen is a highly specialised meditative technique specifically designed to awaken a satori experience in a suitably receptive person. Satori is an extremely compelling and transformative cosmic experience, leading to a powerful sense of transcendental knowledge. There is believable testimony to the effect that the Rinzai Zen system works in practice, and brings about satori in some practitioners. And in Rinzai Zen doctrine, satori is believed to be equivalent to Supreme Enlightenment. But Spiritual Enlightenment is not an experience, and has nothing to do with any kind of apprehensible experience, perception or concept, so Rinzai Zen is quite mistaken in equating satori with it.

The path to Spiritual Enlightenment is entirely centred on an impartial and objective reflective observation of one's experiential matrix – as it appears in one's mind's eye - independent of all forms of received ideas, no matter how profound these ideas may appear to be. Spiritual Enlightenment can be approached only through metaphysical insight, and not through meditative states and techniques. Just

sit quietly on your own in a comfortable chair somewhere, armed with a pen and pad, and do some serious thinking. Start at the very beginning. Keep it simple. What's going on in your mind ? Where is your mind, exactly ? Why are questions like this so difficult to answer ? And so on. It may take some time to get results, so be prepared for that, but don't give up. The results you get from this will be more valuable to you than all the Zen meditating – or any other kind – that anyone has ever done in the entire history of the world. Forget about all you've read, and all you've been told. Forget about Zen and all other forms of dazzling meditative and mindful distraction. Just learn to see what you see, with your own mind's eye, and your own intellect. It's all there.

Endnotes

1 For example, Sharf "Whose Zen? Zen Nationalism Revisited," in Heisig and John (1995), pp. 40-51; and more or less anything by Sharf on Zen.

2 See for example Dumoulin (2005).

3 For a lucid explanation of the principles of Buddhism, see Suzuki (1957): 'The Basis of Buddhist Philosophy.'

4 Suzuki on the Chinese approach to Buddhism in *Essays* (1970), eg in Vol 3: 'Zen and the Chinese mentality'.

5 Soto Zen forums on the web, where people squabble over their 'already enlightened state' by quoting huge chunks of scriptural text in support of their opinions, are well worth a visit: try zenforuminternational.org for a start.

6 'Koan' is an impossible question, eg 'what is the sound of one hand clapping', designed to baffle – and silence - the intellect; 'mondo' is a formalised exchange of question and

answer, between teacher and aspirant, also designed to push your mind out of its normal patterns.

[7] A classic example is the exchange in Brazier (2001) p11.

[8] YouTube is a good place to start for examples of self-declared Enlightened beings, but from our bibliography we have Forman, McKenna, Wilber, Suzuki, Tolle.

[9] A stick used to beat Rinzai meditators who appear to be dozing off or not concentrating properly.

[10] Insanely intense all-day and all-night meditation sessions, sometimes lasting for weeks. Entertaining accounts of things going wrong can be found in Wetering (1974).

[11] 'New Age' is a shorthand for the religious and mystical thinking that emerged in the West in the 1950s and especially the 1960s. The myriad of religions and cults that grew out of this thinking is sometimes referred to as the 'New Religions'.

[12] Centred around the Mahayana concept of the need to Enlighten the whole universe, not just yourself.

[13] Lewis and Hammer (2007), p36.

[14] For example, more or less anything by UG (not Jiddu) Krishnamurti on YouTube.

[15] Eckhart Tolle is the archetypical example; see him on YouTube.

[16] Thomas Merton (1948), and many other examples from Catholic monastics.

[17] Forman (2011) p72.

[18] See myriad accounts on Conscious.tv.

[19] Eg Forman (2011).

[20] Kornfield (2000).

[21] An Indian guru teaching Advaita 'non-duality.'

[22] McKenna (2007), p21.

[23] Ibid p22.

[24] A Brief History Of Integral with Ken Wilber.

[25] Kensho is supposedly a 'glimpse of Enlightenment', or something like that.

[26] Let Ken Wilber explain: *Ken Wilber - Love Until It Hurts* on YouTube.

[27] See Kelley (1977); a very difficult book but an excellent study of spiritual metaphysics for those who take the subject seriously.

[28] For a contemporary account, see Pollan in The New Yorker (2015) which also contains academic references.

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A note about books on Zen. Much has been written, but very little is of value, in the sense of helping anyone gain metaphysical knowledge. D.T.Suzuki's works are far and away the best reading, not only in terms of interesting and accessible scholarship, but also for detailed accounts of his personal experience. The famous names in Zen scholarship, Yampolsky and Dumoulin, have no metaphysical knowledge of their own - none at all - and so, despite their scholarly prowess, are wholly unable to distinguish between profundity and outright stupidity. And with regard to the slew of populist Soto Zen books of the last three or four decades – and there are now a number of Soto books disguising themselves as mainstream Buddhism – Hagen (1999), for example - there is hardly a paragraph in any of them the worth a glance. Avoid, unless you find copies for pennies in your local thrift shop.
[This is only a representative sample of the many books & articles consulted]

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3

Beyond the Ultimate: the impossible proposition at the core of Meister Eckhart's unique teaching, and why he remains so consistently misunderstood

Summary: Eckhart proposed that the ultimate of ultimates was not a perceptible God reachable through mystical experience, but an inconceivable and unfathomable 'something' beyond all human possibility. His proposition rests on an important distinction between the mutually exclusive paths of mysticism and spiritual knowledge. Eckhart's teaching is analysed as if it were an independent metaphysical proposition, detached from its historical and scholarly context. The overall explanatory perspective is that of a dedicated interest in metaphysical gnosis, as part of a quest for the resolution of the human condition. Eckhart

provides some valuable assistance in this regard, identifying the 'Intellect' – the principial force behind ordinary intellection - as a crucial spiritual capacity. Eckhart is likely to remain misunderstood and misinterpreted because those who are attracted to his teachings have no authentic metaphysical grounding of their own, and are therefore unable to recognise and appreciate – let alone elucidate - the key features of a spirituality that extends beyond mystical experientialism.

Introduction

Eckhart von Hochheim (c.1260 – c.1328) better known as Meister Eckhart, was a German Dominican monk who lived and taught in various scholarly institutions in Germany and France. He wrote extensively on advanced metaphysical subjects, and left behind a large body of writings in Latin and German, some of which has yet to be translated into English. His ideas were expressed in the religious idiom of the day, and illustrated with simple parables. Towards the end of his life, Eckhart was charged with heresy – and with good reason, if you understand his actual message - but he died before a final inquisitorial decision could be reached, and he himself - as an ever-loyal foot soldier - always denied the charge. Rome has recently decided, after some persistent lobbying by his supporters, that Eckhart's teachings might not be as unorthodox as they originally thought, but the whole heresy debate is by the bye, and of no real consequence.

And after his death, Eckhart's name all but disappeared. Then towards the end of the 19th century some of his teachings were picked up again, and began to be promoted by various New Age luminaries, from Rudolf Otto to Aldous Huxley to D. T. Suzuki, who were keen to portray

Eckhart as offering an authentically western version of the type of mystical thinking much favoured in the East. And as a direct result of his endorsement by the New Agers, he is now being favourably reassessed by the Catholic Church, as well as Christianity at large. None of this has any bearing on the topic at hand, but it is always worth reminding ourselves of the revolutionary impact New Age religion has had on all aspects of modern spirituality, especially in the creation of an extensive 'religious marketplace', where previously impossibly hard-to-find esoteric doctrines are now freely available to all. This has to be one of the truly great advantages of the modern era.

This short study is intended to identify and delineate the most interesting and provocative idea at the core of Meister Eckhart's teaching, and then to discuss some of its major implications. This will be done from the perspective of a serious interest in achieving genuine metaphysical gnosis, and not with the desire to add another turgid conceptual analysis to the ever growing body of turgid and misleading Eckhart Studies[1]. Eckhart attracts both mystics and scholars of mysticism, and the discernments they bring to the table tend to be either invitations to mood music[2], or complicated conceptual analyses[3], undertaken in the vain hope that by engaging with philosophical intricacies we will somehow edge towards a clearer picture of what Eckhart was actually trying to say[4].

Methodological perspective

We are going to approach Eckhart's key teaching as if it were a standalone testament, completely detached from any historical, scholarly and theoretical context. This is to avoid getting sidelined into worthless discussions about textual

accuracy, or philosophical contextualisation, and all manner of other irrelevancies. We will treat Eckhart as if he were a contemporary figure whose ideas are perfectly easily understandable if we are prepared to make the effort to work through them purposefully and systematically, concentrating on their actual meaning, and not digressing into examining their contextual interrelationships with other philosophical and theological doctrines. We have no interest in the finer points of medieval scholastic theology, or in the disparate philosophical systems that it is composed of.

And interestingly, the approach we will take here can even deal successfully with the potential criticism that, as 'inadequately qualified outsiders', we haven't got anywhere near the 'real' Meister Eckhart, and are seriously misguided in our belief as to what we think he said, or what we think he meant. This is because we are not interested in the 'Eckhart' of accurate, forensic and meticulous scholarship, we are interested only in one or two of the key ideas which emerge from some of his writings, whether or not they have been accurately translated, and whether or not he actually wrote them, or whether or not he meant something else when he did, or whether or not we have the least idea of the finer points of the complex philosophical systems Eckhart was relying on to organise his ideas. It is quite possible that Eckhart's theories are no more than a mishmash of ideas from the Neoplatonists, Aquinas and Maimonides, and that their coherence is entirely accidental. It doesn't even matter to us if Eckhart had no idea what he was talking about, or was the secret mouthpiece for someone else, or was simply addicted to wild and suicidal theological ramblings, the kind that could get you murdered by the church. It may even turn out that a tranche of new writings of his are discovered which completely contradict – in terms of testimony – everything that we intend to argue

here. None of this is critical: we are only interested in a certain key teaching which can be seen –rightly or wrongly –to be present in his writings, and which, once defined on its own terms, becomes completely independent of anything that may happen to Eckhart scholarship, now or in the future.

And as regards our overall perspective, we should point out that the most interesting possible question we can ask of Eckhart's teaching - at every stage in the analysis, and irrespective of how successful or unsuccessful our presentation turns out to be – is not whether or not it his propositions are philosophically coherent, or doctrinally valid, or theologically attractive, but simply whether or not they are 'true'. In other words, is what Meister Eckhart is proposing an accurate portrayal of the metaphysical state of affairs that we actually face, or is he just another waffling religious fantasist ? Is the reality of 'God and the Godhead' exactly like he says it is, or is spiritual metaphysics just an opportunity to talk impressive-sounding nonsense ? This gets right to it. Unfortunately in a study as short as this, we can only frame these questions, and not do them any justice[5].

Eckhart's unique and crucial metaphysical proposition

So what exactly is this crucial proposition ? Basically, that 'God' – as the Ultimate of ultimates – covering any and all designated 'ultimates', whether in the guise of the Buddha-Mind, or Non-dual awareness, is not the last word in any genuine quest for the last word. 'God' – in any conceivable shape or form, including shapelessness and formlessness, suchness or nothingness - is not the end of the road of any quest for metaphysical gnosis, nor is it anywhere approaching it. Because there is a 'something else' – which Eckhart termed

'the Godhead', or 'the Principle' – which is beyond God, and beyond any union with God, and beyond any Nirvana, and beyond any conceivable perfect experience, and beyond any conceivable fathomability. And this 'something else' – the Godhead - is not some kind of conceptual necessity, merely holding a fanciful doctrine together, it is the most crucial element in all existence, without which nothing of any conceivable shape or form – including God, or the Buddha-Mind and every other conceivable conception – could possibly have any perceptibility in the first place.

The implications of Eckhart's elemental metaphysical proposition are immense but, as we shall see, most Eckhart devotees – of whatever stripe – simply do not have the metaphysical insight to be able to explain, and clarify, and help us get closer to the reality of his ideas, and so are obliged instead to portray Eckhart as really just another fully-paid up mystic of the old school, peddling the usual 'God is Love' stuff. Any statements in his writings which appear to contradict this can be attributed to an idiosyncratic style, or to medieval conceptual schemes, and then given a new gloss.

What did Eckhart actually say about 'God' and the 'Godhead'[6] ?

The following are a few representative quotations, chosen for their cogency from very many similar possible examples:

> When I stood in the Principle, the ground of Godhead, no one asked me where I was going or what I was doing: there was no one to ask me. . . . When I go

back into the Principle, the ground of Godhead, no one will ask me whence I came or whither I went. There no one misses me, there God-as-other passes away. [Walshe, Sermon 56; emendations by Kelley (1977).]

Yet again I will say what I never said before: God and Godhead are as different as heaven and earth. …Everything that is in the Godhead is one, and of that there is nothing to be said. God works, the Godhead does no work: there is nothing for it to do, there is no activity in it. [Walshe, Sermon 56]

Indeed I will say more, and this may sound surprising: I say by eternal truth that it is not enough for this Light to disclose the impartable, immutable divine Being, which neither gives nor takes; it will rather disclose that from which this Being comes; it will penetrate directly into its unconditioned Principle [the Godhead], into the silent desert, in which no distinction ever enters, neither Father, nor Son, nor Holy Spirit.

Only there in the Innermost, where no individualized one (or other) abides, is the Light fulfilled, and it is more within [the Principle] than it is in itself. For the Principle is purely unmanifested and wholly immutable and unaffected in itself; but from this immutable Principle are all things manifested. [DW II 416-420, as quoted in Kelley (1977) p.136]

The Godhead in itself, identically the All-inclusive, is comprehensible by nothing other than itself. Neither speech nor thought can ever attain it, and this explains why no man can fathom or describe it. [Q 360, as quoted in Kelley (1977) p.109]

Therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God [ie of all possible conceptions and experiences of God] that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally, there [in the Godhead] where the highest angel, the fly, and the soul are equal. [Walshe, Sermon 87; emendations mine]

God is something that necessarily transcends being. Whatever has being, time, or place, cannot reach God: He is above it. God is in all creatures, insofar as they have being, and yet He is above them. [Walshe, Sermon 67]

God is nameless because none can say or understand anything about Him…He is a transcendent being, and a superessential nothingness…Nor should you (seek to) understand anything about God, for God is above all understanding. One master says, 'If I had a God I could understand, I would no longer consider him God'… So, if you understand anything of Him, that is not He, and by understanding anything of Him you fall into misunderstanding, and from this misunderstanding you fall into brutishness, for whatever in creatures is uncomprehending is brutish. So, if you don't want to become brutish, understand nothing of God the

> unutterable…as He is: a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image; rather, as He is a sheer pure limpid One, detached from all duality…And in that One may we eternally sink from nothingness to nothingness. [Walshe, Sermon 96]

Now the crucial point of interest here is the distinct idea of their being an 'unfathomable, unmanifest Principle' beyond anything that could be conceived of, as 'God'. And as can also be understood from this, when Eckhart refers to 'God' he is obviously not referring to some kind of personalised conception, he is talking about an experiential Ultimate Unity, the attainment of which would constitute the goal of all mysticism, whether conceived of personally – as in theistic religions – or impersonally – as in non-theistic religions. This ultimate mystical union - as satori[7], or Unio Mystica, or Nirvana, or Moksha – wherein the experiential self is experienced in its capacity as the ultimate ground of experiencing, and which is spoken of as a 'Union with the Divine' in Christianity, or as union with the Ultimate Self in Advaita, or as a Non-Dual awareness in New Age religion, or as Nirvana in Buddhism, would not, in Eckhart's teaching, be – in metaphysical terms - anything more than a supremely powerful, and supremely compelling, modification of ordinary consciousness; in other words, no more than an 'altered state', no matter how cosmic, all-encompassing and significant the experience might appear to be.

In other words, whatever can be conceived of as an 'ultimate' can never actually be the actual 'ultimate'. It might look to be the last word, and you may think it is, but it is not. This is the essence of Eckhart's most astonishing testimony. Eckhart is saying that when you 'think' you have 'perceived' as far as you think you can go, you can be sure you are deluding yourself. If you think 'this perception or perceived non-perception is definitely Heaven, or Nirvana, or Moksha, or God or Nothingness or Suchness, and I have no further realisations to realise', then you are most certainly mistaken.

Now how can we possibly make sense of paradoxical statements of this sort ? We are certainly knocking at the door of the furthest limits of intelligibility. Isn't all of this just grandiose nonsense masquerading as spirituality ? Possibly. And given the capacity of human beings wilfully to delude themselves, more than likely. So we have to take all of the key metaphysical propositions and break them down into their constituent parts, and then attempt to justify each crucial element.

The quest for metaphysical insight

We can start by outlining a very basic and elemental idea of a 'metaphysical quest', and then work forward from there. A 'metaphysical quest' begins when an ordinary human being sets about trying to answer the big questions of life and existence, in the belief that, in answering those questions, the profound and persistent dissatisfaction that mysteriously poisons their existence will somehow be resolved, and ended, hopefully in a decisive way.

And anyone embarking on this metaphysical quest will soon find themselves heading in the direction of religion.

This is not because religion is necessarily the best direction to be heading in, but because it is what we are led to believe, thanks to education, is where the answers lie. 'Religion' – as a generic concept covering the generic features of all the major religions – has evolved over thousands of years, and contains within it many apparently convincing solutions to the difficulties thrown up by existential questioning. It offers reassuring beliefs, absorbing practices, and 'systems' – like yoga, and meditation, and contemplative prayer - whereby you get a sense of your spiritual self, and then, in time, a sense of how you might deepen your spirituality.

Mysticism

At the shallowest end, religion offers something you can involve yourself in right away, and this can, by taking your mind of your existential worries, seem to solve the problem, albeit in a very superficial fashion. And at the deep end, religion offers you the possibility of direct contact with the supposed creator and ruler of the universe – God, the Buddha-mind, or whatever you want to label it – and this process of direct contact is called 'mysticism'. Mysticism comes in many forms, from very tangible modes of cosmic consciousness, to very ethereal and subtle cerebral intuitions; though the common denominator to all mystical experiences, rapturous or subtle, is that they are directly apprehendable, and tangible, and graspable, even when they appear to be so refined and delicate and incomprehensible as to defy description. So all mystical experiences are, in a very straightforward sense, 'apprehended experiences'; that is to say, experiences which can be identified and labelled, and referred to. If they were not apprehendable experiences, with a measure of objectivity, and with noticeable characteristics, mystics would not be able to characterise them, and refer to them, and mysticism - as an

experiential possibility - would not, could not, exist.

The other prominent feature of mystical experiences is that they invariably come accompanied by an overwhelming sense of certainty. They have an authority and self-validation quite unlike anything you could normally encounter in everyday life. They leave the mystic in no doubt that what they have experienced is the answer to all their questions, and a final revelation, now and for all time.

Most mystical experiences resulting from meditation, prayer, and contemplation are positive, and rapturous, and delightful, but this is not always the case. Sometimes things go horribly wrong, and the hapless aspirant is plunged into a living nightmare. Negative mysticism – the 'bad trip' – is a well-known occupational hazard of those who seek spiritual illumination through narcotics – like ayahuasca, or LSD, or mescaline - and of course terrifying experiencing is also well-known to schizophrenics, although schizophrenia itself is seldom considered a form of spiritual illumination – not in western society, at least - and most sufferers will go to any lengths to avoid having to endure schizophrenic episodes. This says nothing about the comparative validity of such experiencing, but an awful lot about human beings, and what they like and dislike.

But the really great difficulty arises when we start to subject mysticism to any kind of objective analysis. Mystics who have been granted special and sacred experiences as the result of meditation and prayer and spiritual practice would doubtless resist the indignity of being bundled into the same category as drug users and schizophrenics, mainly because they believe their experiencing has granted them privileged access to some kind of sacred knowledge, and not just to

profound feelings of well-being embedded hallucinatory religious imagery. And this sacred knowledge – so they believe – is intimately secret, and divinely sanctioned, and is cosmically special, and is not just handed out to all and sundry. And it is most certainly not merely accidental, or in any way obtainable by mere technique, or the by-product of a blood disorder, or a brain malfunction, or anything in any way grossly mundane. Above all, religiously dedicated mystics like to think of their experiencing as equivalent to a hard-won reward for their intense – but divinised and sublimated - spiritual effort, or perhaps for their massive goodness of heart – or their massively immaculate purity of mind - or for God knows what else, but definitely a massive something of something. Spiritual experiences are never interpreted by their recipients as either merely mechanical, or randomly accidental.

And it is this element of the 'self-validatory' and 'self-affirmatory' significance which is the real problem with mystical experience. As has been said, mystical experiences come with their own sense of authority and certainty, and if they happen to someone with a strong religious faith, they seem to be proof positive of the ultimate validity of that faith, and there would seem to be absolutely no reason to subject them to sceptical questioning of any kind. In fact, sceptical questioning always feels like a kind of blasphemy to any highly sensitised mystic, who naturally feels very protective towards the sacred experiencing that has been afforded them. All of which means that, from the point of view of the believing mystic, their experiences have taken them as far as they, or anyone, ever need go with regard to answering the ultimate questions of life. Intense mystical experiences are therefore – for the mystic - the end of the spiritual road, with nowhere else to go, even if ordinary and everyday life itself still has to be

lived – perhaps endured – for the time being.

And this is where someone like Meister Eckhart comes in. What he said, in effect – and by implication, as he did not address the subject in precisely these terms - was that mystical experiencing, no matter how profound and revelatory and divine and sacred, could not be the end of any authentic metaphysical quest, because there was still a more important 'something' way beyond all of that, and that this 'something way beyond all of that' had nothing to do with mysticism, or experience, or God, or life, or Love, or anything remotely humanly comprehensible in any conceivable way. So different is it from anything we know, or can think of, that even to think that we have managed to label it as a 'something' is a big mistake.

Eckhart's pronouncement obviously makes for catastrophic reading for every mystic, and every religious believer, and everyone with any vested interest in a religion of any kind. This is essentially why the church planned on shutting him up. All religions end with an apprehendable ultimate state of some sort, whether it be union with a transcendent God, as in the theistic religions; or an absorption in a non-dual Nothingness, or Suchness, as in a non-theistic religion like Buddhism or Jainism. No religions posit any 'possibilities' beyond the experiential, as this would effectively destroy their – already doubtful - claim to control access to spirituality. Because if the 'key to everything' lies beyond the experiential, and is essentially inconceivable, how can us poor aspirants be sure that the church – or any religious authority of any kind – actually knows what it is talking about ?

But if not mysticism, then what ?

It is something of an indication of the ongoing poverty of spiritual discourse that this question still needs to be asked. To date there are apparently only two avenues open to human beings who want to try to resolve the mystery of life and existence: belief, or mysticism. You either adopt a series of beliefs, quietly modifying them over time from very primitive fantasies into something more sophisticated and credible; or you involve yourself in various religious practices, from yoga and meditation, to guided prayer and contemplation, in the hope that some mysterious transformation will take place behind the scenes, making you ever more receptive to, and ever more worthy of, some kind of direct connection to spiritual reality. This is how mysticism works.

But if you are in any way exacting, and intellectually demanding, and possessed of a genuinely inquiring mind, you will surely find the idea of salvation through 'mere belief' deeply unsatisfying. Which means your only alternative is mysticism, in one form or another. 'Mysticism' here refers to any attempt to engage with a method, or a technique, whereby you can practice your way into spiritual progress, increasing your spiritual receptivity, and capacity, either by force of will, or as the result of deliberate and prolonged exposure to the supposedly spiritual elements in your experiential realm. Mysticism, as a practice, is any deliberate and purposeful attempt to increase your spiritual experiencing.

And there can no doubt whatsoever that mystical practices – yoga, prayer, meditation, mindfulness, narcosis and any number of other options – can lead, on occasion, to some unbelievably dramatic alterations in consciousness. You can unite with God, or you can expand to fill the entire cosmos,

or you can become the One Mind source of everything, as a state of permanent non-dual awareness. Or you can enter the rapture of Nirvana, floating in an unlimited cosmos of Nothingness and Emptiness. Or you can become the source of limitless Universal Love, radiating compassion and goodness to infinite realms in infinite universes. All very wonderful and fantastic. And if you can find a way to integrate these experiences with your ordinary life, you will be considered a holy person; otherwise you run the risk of being thought of as brain-fried, and perhaps destined for incarceration. But the point is that no matter how spectacular your mystical experiencing, and no matter now extensive and convincing it appears to be, it nevertheless remains 'mere experiencing', and vulnerable to all the uncertainties and ambiguities that all experiencing is essentially subject to. Experience cannot offer the final answer to anything because it is not capable of doing so; it is only ever capable of appearing to do so.

And the only way to deal with the false promise of experience – as part of a quest for metaphysical insight - is to change the terms of engagement at the very start. You have to realise, as soon as is meaningfully possible, that experiential 'feelings' and 'yearnings' and 'sentiments' and 'sensations', no matter how compelling, are always 'apprehended', and that anything apprehended is always one step removed from something else, and anything 'one step removed from something else' cannot answer the question 'how can I resolve the enigma of experience ?' Insofar as you depend on experiential and apprehendable perceptions to supply you with the answer, you are always doomed to uncertainty, and therefore to failure.

The Intellect

But how do we know all this ? How can we be sure ? Because the one and only capacity we possess to help us adjudicate in this matter tells us so. And that one and only capacity is the intellect. The intellect is your perfectly simple and straightforward, 'front-of-the-house' ability to think, and to assess, and to judge. And there comes a point – unfortunately always some considerable distance down the road of any metaphysical quest – when you realise that whatever you present the intellect with, it can always find a 'flaw' – an inadequacy - in that which it apprehends. If you present your ordinary, simple, front-of-the-house intellect with God, or with the Buddha-Mind, or with the Ultimate of Ultimates, it will say, sooner or later, yes, wonderful, but 'so what ?' So what, God, the Buddha-Mind, and all the rest of it ? And the answer to 'so what ?' is, of course, 'so nothing'. The intellect reduces everything to dust. As Samuel Beckett put it in *Molloy*: 'Might not the beatific vision become a source of boredom, in the long run?' Yet this ability of the intellect to find an inadequacy in 'all it surveys' is not the great spiritual curse it might appear to be – it is our very road to salvation.

Meister Eckhart knew as much. This is some of what he had to say on the intellect, and the way it works, and its relation to a higher metaphysical capacity:

> Now note the explanation of this. Intellect's object and lodgement is essence, not accident but pure unmixed being in itself. When the intellect discerns true being it descends on it, comes to rest on it, pronouncing its intellectual

word about the object it has seized on. But, so long as the intellect does not find true being and does not penetrate to the ground, so as to be able to say, 'this is this; it is such and not otherwise,' so long does it remain in a condition of questing and expectation; it does not settle down or rest, but labours on, seeking, expecting, and rejecting. And though it may perhaps spend a year or more investigating a natural truth, to see what it is, it still has to work long again to strip off what it is not. All this time it has nothing to go by and makes no pronouncement at all, as long as it has not penetrated to the ground of truth with full realization. Therefore, the intellect never rests in this life. However much God may reveal Himself in this life, yet it is still as nothing to what He really is. Though truth is there, in the ground, it is yet veiled and concealed from the intellect. All this while, the intellect has no support to rest on in the way of a changeless object. It still does not rest, but goes on expecting and preparing for something yet to become known, but so far hidden.

Thus there is no way man can know what God is. But one thing he does know: what God is not. [Walshe, Sermon 3]

There is a principle in the intellective soul, untouched by time and corporeality, flowing from pure Intellect, remaining in pure Intellect, itself wholly intellectual. In this principle is God, ever verdant, ever flowering in all the fullness and glory of his actual Self. . . . It is free of all names and void of all structures. It is one and unconditioned, as God is one and unconditioned, and no man can in any way behold it mentally. [DW 1, 35-40, as quoted in Kelley (1977), p.26]

When we receive God in being, we receive Him in His forecourt, for being is the forecourt of His dwelling. Where is He then in His temple, where He shines in holiness? Intellect is the temple of God. God dwells nowhere more truly than in His temple, in intellect, just as the second master said, that 'God is an

> intellect that lives solely by understanding itself' -remaining alone in Himself where nothing ever touched Him, for He is there alone in His stillness. God in His own knowing knows Himself in Himself. [Walshe, Sermon 67]

> The intellect is the head of the soul. Those who put the matter roughly say that love has precedence, but those who speak most precisely say expressly - and it is true - that the kernel of eternal life lies in understanding more than in love. You should know why. Our finest masters - and there are not many of them - say that understanding and intellect go straight up to God. [Walshe, Sermon 30]

Insofar as these quotations are representative of Eckhart's thinking on our intellectual capacity, they tell a remarkable story, quite unlike anything else in spiritual metaphysics. There is nothing here about mystical rapture, or absorption in divine love, or the piercings of the aching and prayerful heart; it is all about intellective functioning – thought and thinking - showing us the need to exercise our ability to discriminate, and get to the intellective point, as part of a quest for ever greater insight into the intellect itself.

We need to be clear however, that it is helpful to distinguish between our ordinary, everyday, front of the house intellect – given to obsessive thoughts, trivial insights and mistaken judgements – and our more metaphysical 'Intellect'; that is to say, that same everyday intellect when put into the service of metaphysical insight. They are both built of the same stuff, and both subject to the same massive errors of judgement, but when the intellect is encouraged to investigate its metaphysical capacities, it begins to transform itself into something more elemental, and insightful, and starts to become what Eckhart terms the 'Intellect'.

But where does all this get us ? Merely having recognised the intellect as the key to metaphysical insight will not, of itself, guarantee delivery of such insight: one has to engage with the whole process of questing towards metaphysical wisdom, and engage with it over time, indefinitely, whatever it takes, until it has resolved every possible metaphysical mystery. And experience teaches us that insight – as an ordinary, everyday, mundane capacity – operates in a strangely roundabout way, moving in something like an outward spiral, with realisations deepening over time, often taking decades to work themselves out, even when the initial insight appears conclusive. It is the same with metaphysical insight, in that a certain obvious fact – like the importance of patience and persistence in achieving clarity of mind - seems to return to you again and again, hardly ever seeming to add anything to your existing stock of knowledge, and it is only on its umpteenth return that you discover that you never really grasped its crucial validity it in the first place, even though you were convinced you did.

Trying to reach the end of the road

So when we 'think' we have reached the end of the road then, according to our reading of Eckhart, we can be sure we haven't. We can be sure of this because our thinking will be based on a mental reference to memories of certain key experiences we have had and, as we have seen, this cannot deliver the kind of absolute certainty we crave. Because is based on the type of self-validating circularity which our intellect will eventually dismiss. How can you know - independently of your own experiencing - that your belief in your own spiritual breakthrough is in fact the breakthrough you believe – and want – it to be ? We validate the conclusions we come to by a process which involves calling up various mental images, and then checking those images against various ideas we have decided are appropriate to use in coming to judgements, and, under normal, everyday circumstances, this works perfectly well. But if we are serious about genuine metaphysical knowledge, and serious about overcoming the very real problem of the inherent uncertainty in drawing conclusions about our experiencing, and serious about all manner of other metaphysical issues, we are obviously in a proper fix.

Because as we have seen, the final piece of the real metaphysical puzzle – the Godhead, or whatever you want to call it - is beyond reach. It is inconceivable, impossible, non-experiential, unfathomable. Eckhart offers this advice:

> Now you might say, 'Well sir, what use is my intellect then, if it is supposed to be empty and

functionless? Is that the best thing for me to do - to raise my mind to an unknowing knowledge that can't really exist? For if I knew anything at all it would not be ignorance, and I should not be empty and bare. Am I supposed to be in total darkness ?'

Certainly. You cannot do better than to place yourself in darkness and in unknowing.

'Oh sir, must everything go then, and is there no turning back ?'

No indeed, by rights there is no returning.

'But what is this darkness? What do you call it? What is its name? '

The only name it has is 'potential receptivity,' which certainly does not lack being nor is it deficient, but it is the potential of receptivity in which you will be perfected. That is why there is no turning back from it. But if you do turn back, that is not on account of any truth, but because of something else - the senses, the world, or the devil. And if you give way to the impulse to turn back, you are bound to lapse into sin, and you may backslide so far as to fall eternally. Therefore there is no

> turning back, but only a pressing forward, so as to attain and achieve this possibility. It never rests until it is filled with all being. Just as matter never rests till it is filled with every possible form, so too intellect never rests till it is filled to its capacity. [Walshe, Sermon 4]

In other words, you keep going, no matter what. You keep trying to push your intellectual insight to its furthest limits, always on the lookout for some clues which might take you further still. And the most important feature of this relentless striving into the darkness of unending metaphysical ignorance – and it cannot be overstated – is the 'receptivity' it generates: so don't let yourself down by grabbing on to beliefs and experiences when you know you still have further to go. Be receptive to the impossible by reminding yourself that the impossible is probably only possible when you have exhausted all possibilities. Let your intellect destroy everything that comes its way. One day it might encounter something it cannot dismiss, but this will not be an experience, or a belief, or a thought, or a satori, or mindfulness, or a Unio Mystica, or divine rapture, or anything you presently can have the faintest idea of. And it will have to come and get you, you will not be able to reach it by the force of your own will, or by the goodness of your heart.

Meister Eckhart terms the 'event' whereby the unfathomable and inconceivable reaches across and bridges the unbridgeable divide between us and it, 'mercy', meaning 'grace', meaning an act in our favour the nature of which is

essentially beyond our comprehension. As humans, we like to think we deserve the good things that come our way, but 'grace' has nothing to do with rewards. But now we are already straying into the realms of sentimental and mystical thinking, and this can only serve to cloud our judgement, so it is enough to confront the paradoxical truth – part disheartening, part energising and inspiring - that we will never reach spiritual enlightenment by our own efforts, though we know we have to keep trying.

Why is Meister Eckhart so consistently misinterpreted ?

The real problem with Eckhart is that, on the page, his metaphysical teaching is not quite as clear as it could be. He embedded his ideas in a tangle of scholastic concepts, Christian terminology, and biblical illustrations, making it relatively straightforward for those who want to interpret him as just another conventional mystic - albeit one with a very original and distinctive voice - to make their case. As it is, most people come to Eckhart indirectly, usually through the medium of a limited selection of quotes – as in this essay - making his thoughts seem surprisingly contemporary and straightforward, and not at all musty and gothic, but this is not the Eckhart you will find if you try ploughing through his collected works. There you will see that he was more than capable of rambling, and freewheeling, and wandering way off the point, and arguing badly, and talking about one thing when meaning quite another, and, yes, also talking complete rubbish[8]. Standard occupational hazards of any spiritual instructor, you might say in his defence, but the problem remains that Eckhart's unique and distinctive metaphysical teaching is often hidden under more than one bushel. And at

times it can look like a whole medieval cartload of them.

All of which means – again - that there is much in Eckhart which will allow anyone, if they are so minded, to characterise him as a mystic. Mysticism means believing that spiritual salvation is to be achieved by means of special experiences, which can range from a rapturous union with God, to a sedate non-dual awareness, with a whole range of psychedelic possibilities in between. Spiritual experiences are often so powerful that mystics believe them to be self-validating and self-explanatory, but there are also many esoteric doctrines to consult if you feel you need a second opinion as to exactly what you think may have befallen you. And Eckhart does talk a lot about 'loving God' and 'goodness' and 'God is love' and all the rest of it, and this is unquestionably mystical talk, and hard to interpret in almost any other way, were it not for the fact that elsewhere Eckhart talks in metaphysical terms, making a very different case, and clearly arguing for principial insight of a quite different order from anything even distantly imagined by mystics. And Eckhart's metaphysical teaching, though often sitting side by side with what appears to be a very conventional Christian mysticism – and all about the love of God - is clearly designed to supersede that mysticism, and transcend it, and put a decisive end to it, and to mark out an entirely different path to spiritual liberation altogether, with a quite different goal, and held together by a quite different perspective.

More confusingly still - and this too cannot possibly be over emphasised – spiritual metaphysics, though grounded in exactly the same basic human desire to resolve the mystery of our perplexing and distressing human condition, has no overlap with mysticism whatsoever, and cannot be thought of as heading even vaguely in the same

direction, and therefore merely an alternative path leading to the same goal. Which means that even if you took all the mystical experiences in the history of the world, and concentrated them in a single hapless individual, they would not, of themselves, lead to a single metaphysical insight, and certainly not to the critical basic insight that spiritual enlightenment cannot be attained through mystical experiences, no matter how profound those experiences might appear to be. To attain spiritual insight, you have to head in an altogether different direction, and say goodbye to mysticism for once and for all.

Now the truth is that most of those who, for whatever reason, find themselves provoked and inspired by Eckhart will have no grounding in spiritual metaphysics at any level, and will only be able think in mystical terms. They will not have been alerted to the possibility – as a proposition with direct relevance to them - that mysticism is a dead end, a false trail, a siren call to nowhere. So none of them will be asking simple, penetrating and usefully clarifying metaphysical questions like 'what's this all about ? What's all this mysticism for ? What's the point of it ? What's the point of God ?'

There are those scholars who flirt with mysticism in their imaginations, vaguely believing that, by engaging with Eckhart through his writings, and absorbing him off the page, and by turning over some of his ideas in their minds, while on long meditative walks in the countryside, or in sparkling conversation with clever postgraduates in a cafe, that they will bring about some sort of benign transformation of themselves - in their innermost 'soul' - and then, as the phrase has it, 'grow in spirituality'. This is mysticism by association; essentially vicarious, and osmotic. 'University

mysticism' you could call it, with the 'transformative spirituality' – pleasant feelings and 'profound' thoughts - taking place in book-lined offices, and seminar rooms, and comfortable lodgings, and resulting, in time, in more of the books we get to read on Eckhart.

Then there are those mystics, predominantly from New Age groups - though some will be in monastic orders - who use Eckhart to interpret and give shape to some of mystical experiences triggered by their own formal meditations, and contemplative prayers. But even in this second and more experientially involved group, no one will be receptive to metaphysical insight, or anything like it, because they are primarily concerned only to deepen and extend their mystical sensitivities, in the quest for ever stronger and more intense mystical experiencing, believing that this alone will lead them to the Promised Land.

By now it should be clear that, under these most difficult of intellectual circumstances - combining conceptual confusion with misdirection and human error - Eckhart is more or less doomed to be repeatedly misinterpreted, and have his key propositions not only disregarded, but likely never actually seen in the first place. This is not because of any malicious intent, but simply because those who are trying to interpret Eckhart are basically not aware that you can approach the quest for spiritual liberation in anything other than in experiential terms. As they see it, there has to be something minimally tangible, and apprehendable, and noticeable – even at an extremely subtle and cerebral level - for spirituality to exist at all, otherwise what else is there ? How else do we know what's going on ? So surely, for example, that magnificent sense of subtle 'sweetness and light' that pervades everything after your early morning

meditation is proof positive of your ever increasing spirituality ?

Unfortunately no, it is not. It is proof only of your ever deepening self-absorption, and your ability to indulge in fantasy. Spirituality is of another order altogether, and nothing to do with sweetness and light. It's about a certain type of knowledge, a certain type of insight. So there has to be another way to proceed, though it might look to be something of a counterintuitive undertaking to begin with, and full of unexpected demands. You have to learn to ask searching questions, and to keep asking them, until you think you might be heading towards an answer. And then you have to keep asking ever more searching and penetrating questions - like 'how do I really know what this is all about ?' and 'How could I possibly find a way to tell ?' - to try to find a way to make sure you are not deluding yourself, and to try to find a way to 'ground' yourself without resorting to religious belief. And so on. It can feel like a thankless uphill climb, especially if you have thoroughly indoctrinated yourself with comforting religious ideas. But in time – and who knows how long it will take ? - you might begin – slowly –to understand what you're all about. And begin to see how your mind works, and what you are made of, and what you amount to. And after that, you won't be going back to 'mysticism', or the triviality of religion. You will be able to stand on your own two feet, and think for yourself. And then, for the first time, you will be able to appreciate the utterly outstanding and provocative teaching that Meister Eckhart has left us with.

Endnotes:

[1] See the heavyweight *Companion to Eckhart Studies* (2012); full of meticulous scholarship for scholarship's sake, but, as ever, offering nothing to those who would like to know how to go about realising Eckhart's realisations for themselves.

[2] See Appelbaum's prototypically New Age web article, or Demkovich (2006).

[3] See Enders *Meister Eckhart's Understanding of God*, in Hackett (2012), or McGinn *The God Beyond God* (1981), or Kieckhefer *Meister Eckhart's Conception of Union with God* (1978).

[4] So far the only book to have successfully identified Eckhart's true teaching, and to have argued the case with some strength, is Kelley's *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (1977). Well worth the necessary effort, because it is a dense and difficult book, even for experienced professionals. Yet even Kelley was unable or unwilling to disentangle himself from Catholic theology and explain Eckhart from the standpoint of an independent and objective spiritual metaphysics; a fact which, given Kelley's indisputable insight into the whole Eckhartian project, amounts to a most bewildering shortcoming. Spiritual metaphysics is not, and never will be, a subdivision of theology, let alone the Catholic version. Incidentally, Kelly's book is not mentioned even once in 781 pages of the *Companion to Eckhart Studies* !

[5] Once again, the book by Kelley (1977) is a useful next step.

[6] It is very important to remember, when reading Eckhart, that he very often did not make it clear when he referred to

'God' whether he meant 'the Godhead', or God as normally conceived, or something else altogether. A bizarre and self-defeating feature of his writings, given how important the various distinctions are.

[7] For Eckhart and Zen, see Suzuki (1957), but experiencing satori is not reaching 'the Godhead'.

[8] Many sections of the *Parisian Questions and Prologues* (1974), for example, make for dismal reading.

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4

Krishnamurti explained: a critical study

'One of the greatest thinkers of the age' (!)
(the Dalai Lama)

Summary: The acclaim accorded Jiddu 'Krishnamurti' (1895-1986) – as an apparently major figure in our modern understanding of all things spiritual – shows just how shallow western popular culture is when it tries to extend its reach beyond science, materialism and celebrity. Krishnamurti liked to portray himself as a wholly independent thinker, and as someone who encouraged similar independence of thought in others, yet he milked the role of an oriental guru tirelessly, discoursing from on high in an autocratic and commanding manner. At best his vast body of transcribed teachings is diverting nonsense; at worst he's wasting our time.

Introduction

The acclaim accorded Jiddu 'Krishnamurti' (1895-1986) – as an apparently major figure in our modern understanding of all things spiritual – shows just how shallow popular culture is when it tries to extend its reach beyond science, materialism and celebrity. The dismal truth is that western society still has no objective and independent metaphysical ideas of its own, and no ambition to explore topics other than psychoanalysis and popular theories of wellbeing, and this leaves us vulnerable to all kinds of esoteric vacuity. We can't tell the difference – in terms of spiritual significance - between simple truths and well-meaning hot air, so anyone declaiming confidently on topics other than money or politics is sure to be granted a gilded platform and an eager audience.

The roots of our severely defective approach to metaphysics and spirituality lie deep in western intellectual history, and warrant a detailed study of their own. For our purposes we can only analyse some of the more superficial features of this deficiency in the light of the way we revere figures who, with just the slightest bit of extra reflection, hardly deserve their elevated status. Krishnamurti is one such, and his story makes for an interesting study.

To begin with, Krishnamurti liked to portray himself as a wholly independent thinker, and as someone who encouraged similar independence of thought in others, yet he played the role of an oriental guru tirelessly, discoursing from on high in an autocratic and commanding manner. He didn't wear orange robes, or pretend to be a sannyasin, but he still managed to look strangely unworldly, with an odd, helmet-like comb-over, sepulchral features, and an unsettlingly

disconnected manner. He claimed to be on intimate terms with the key problems of everyday life, yet he spent his entire existence insulated from worldly worries in a comfortably entitled way. And his teachings have more to do with a type of 'swami-fied' conceptual poetry and lyrical freewheeling than with comprehensibility and coherence, let alone practicability.

But before we go into all this, we need to make clear at the outset that our primary focus is on how best to assess the ultimate validity of his teachings -- on their own terms -- as impartially and objectively as possible. This means that we are not essentially concerned with any specific aspect of Krishnamurti's biography or private life – insofar as this aspect might reveal hypocrisy or dishonesty or scandalous behaviour -- we are only concerned with identifying his core metaphysical propositions – such as they are -- and analysing them in a straightforward and transparent way. No special spiritual insight or experience is required to follow this line of thought: simply the ability to think clearly and impartially, underpinned by a healthy scepticism.

Perspective: why study Krishnamurti ?

Krishnamurti remains something of an outlier in the pantheon of 20th century Indian missionaries to the west, in that he repeatedly disparaged the idea of devotees blindly following him, yet he did nothing to discourage them gathering reverentially at his feet. He lectured to the faithful in seemingly simple and jargon-free language, apparently avoiding ascents into fantasy, yet anyone able to follow even the simplest argument would surely soon realise that his discourse was entirely declarative and self-validating, and his conclusions either nonsensical or absurd.

Then why bother with him at all ? Because he somehow managed to be taken seriously, often by people who ought to have known better; and despite his obvious shortcomings he was never really called to account, or criticised in any decisive way. It is his mysterious, persisting and unwarranted stature which is both fascinating and instructive.

'Encountering' Krishnamurti

There are a number of different ways in which we can approach the Krishnamurti mystique, but it is illuminating to follow the trail of those who perhaps encounter him for the first time. People often start with the books, and these usually feature a front cover close-up of his head, in profile, looking thoughtful and slightly austere; and this quickly sets him apart from the overt grandiosity of the swamis, who are often keen to emphasise their Hindu exoticism. Krishnamurti's schoolmasterly bearing seems to indicate a more focussed and disciplined thought process than might be found in the writings of someone extolling transcendental psychedelia. The name 'Krishnamurti' also has a certain cogent ring to it, hinting at oriental wisdom and profundity, while avoiding unseemly showmanship. And the book titles contain words like 'Freedom', 'Culture', 'Education', 'Intelligence' and other topics of general intellectual interest, giving the impression that he might be an academic of sorts working at popularising complex issues, at the same time as managing to synthesize east with west.

And his video lectures continue the pedagogical feel – at least on the surface – with Krishnamurti expounding ideas with what appears to be a jargon-free simplicity. He dresses modestly, and his speech is characteristically slow and

deliberate, given to thoughtful pauses and touches of gentle humour. He occasionally gestures with his hands, and often repeats key points for emphasis. His audiences are always wholly attentive and reverential, though the overall atmosphere is informal and relaxed. Dissolute and bohemian types are noticeably absent from any turnout. We could be at a school event for parents and sixth formers; or perhaps at a reading in a literary festival.

What we are identifying here is the specific nature of Krishnamurti's appeal. He appears to be dispensing eastern holy wisdom to educated and sober western audiences, without the least mystical obfuscation, and without the least unnecessary prerequisites -- whatever they might be, whether incense, or rituals, or yogic practices. In other words, Krishnamurti is the guru to go to if you are attracted to eastern teachings, but perhaps are uncertain about having to wade through local colour. He is supposedly giving us spiritual wisdom in its purest form.

Now of course this says nothing whatsoever about the content and quality of Krishnamurti's message itself; it is only a contextual first step towards explaining how, in the light of our systematic analysis of what he actually had to say, he was able to maintain a reputation for 'intelligent plain speaking'.

Example: Krishnamurti on attachment and detachment (video lecture)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDpVebZ88_k

This bite-sized chunk of instruction (about 13 minutes) is typical of both his style and method. It begins with his stately reading out of a question put to him – read out twice

- followed by some moments of deliberative silence, followed by his answer.

'The question is: 'Attachment brings about a kind of emotional exchange, a human warmth. This seems a fundamental need. Detachment produces coldness, lack of affection, a break in relationship. It can also deeply hurt others. Something seems to be wrong with this approach. What do you say?'

Krishnamurti starts his answer with the line 'I don't have to say anything !', which draws knowing laughter from the audience. This will be seen as wholly innocent throwaway banter by his devotees, but it indicates the imperiousness and self-importance within which he has situated himself. It is the kind of remark old-style schoolteachers would make, to remind the class of the unbridgeable gulf of authority between master and pupil, and thereby briefly to luxuriate, not in superior knowledge, but in a superior status. He is making it clear to us that he is doing us a favour by his mere presence.

What then follows appears to be a phenomenology of the concept of 'attachment', beginning with an unpacking of the word itself, followed by a kind of illustrative portrait of the concept in action; then followed by an inquiry into the idea of 'detachment', as its polar opposite. As described in these bald terms, Krishnamurti's method might seem perfectly logical and reasonable, as well as helpful to those in the audience who might benefit from witnessing an exercise in elementary conceptual analysis. Krishnamurti seems to be showing us not only how to think, but also how to get to grips with elusive phenomena, through both a careful look at the words we use, and exactly how we use them.

But if you follow his train of thought, and keep track of

his line of argument – while quite reasonably expecting a coherent picture to emerge - you soon realise that, almost as soon as he has begun, his account descends into ideational freewheeling and semi-poetic nonsense:

> "I am attached to you. The word 'attach' means to cling, to hold – attaché – the feeling that you belong to somebody and that somebody belongs to you, to hold, to cling, to adhere, like a plaster – sorry! – all that is implied in that word. And the questioner says cultivating detachment breeds lack of affection, a coldness, a break in relationship; the cultivation of the opposite. Naturally it will. You understand? If I am attached to you, the audience, and I feel this attachment is dangerous because I know I will be unhappy if I don't meet all of you and talk to all of you, which is my fulfilment, which is called attachment, then seeing the danger of that, depression when I don't meet a large audience, if I meet two people and, you know, go through all that ugly business, and seeing all that I say I must cultivate detachment. So I must break from you, I must break my relationship if I have a wife or a husband, or a girl or boy, or whatever it is. So I gradually withdraw. And in this process of isolation I hurt others – right? – I hurt my wife or my father, I hurt lots of people, and so on.
>
> Now, is there – please listen – is there an opposite to attachment? If detachment is the opposite of attachment, that detachment is an idea, is a concept, is a

> conclusion that thought has brought about realising that attachment produces a lot of trouble, a lot of conflict, jealousy, anxiety and so on, so on. So thought says, by Jove, much better be detached. Detachment is a non-fact – right? – whereas attachment is a fact. I don't know if you are following all this."[1]

Worse still, his analysis of 'attachment', delivered in those pseudo-scholarly tones - and as seemingly clear-cut and clarifying as any classroom explanation can be - betrays an astonishingly crude and shallow view of what it is to be attached to something, as well as an equally facile portrait of detachment, characterising it as a form of 'non-factual cultivated isolation' brought about in response to the 'conflict, jealousy and anxiety' of attachment. 'Detachment is a non-fact', he tells us, 'whereas attachment is a fact.'

Those sympathetic to this kind of instruction will say that picking on a single isolated example is to take Krishnamurti 'out of context', and to fail to grasp the 'bigger picture'. But the more you read of him, the easier it is to see that his explanations never deviate from a particular format:

> 'Conflict can only, and must inevitably, exist between the false and the false, not between truth and the false. Isn't that so? There cannot be conflict between what is true and what is false. But there can be conflict and there must be conflict between two false things, between the degrees of falseness, between the opposites.' [2]

and

> ‘So is fear perhaps the reason why you have not got the energy of that passion to find out for yourself why this quality of love is missing in you, why there is not this flame in your heart? If you have examined your own mind and heart very closely, you will know why you haven't got it. If you are passionate in your discovery to find why you haven't got it, you will know it is there. Through complete negation alone, which is the highest form of passion, that thing which is love, comes into being. Like humility you cannot cultivate love. Humility comes into being when there is a total ending of conceit - then you will never know what it is to be humble. A man who knows what it is to have humility is a vain man. In the same way when you give your mind and your heart, your nerves, your eyes, your whole being to find out the way of life, to see what actually is and go beyond it, and deny completely, totally, the life you live now - in that very denial of the ugly, the brutal, the other comes into being. And you will never know it either. A man who knows that he is silent, who knows that he loves, does not know what love is or what silence is.’ [3]

How are we best to understand this kind of lofty gibberish ? Essentially as a form of dictatorial proclamation, in which the guru believes himself to be instructing us from a

transcendental realm – 'channelling' wisdom, if you like – thereby legitimately bypassing sense and coherence in the process, even while supposedly respecting it. For example, Krishnamurti claims that 'a man who knows that he is silent, who knows that he loves, does not know what love is or what silence is', in which he is combining the fatuous chestnut 'you're not really happy if you're aware you're happy' with transcendental notions of 'love' and 'silence' – elemental 'passions' beyond 'knowledge', as he sees it – to give us the supposedly paradoxical truth 'you're not really loving if you know you're loving', meaning that any kind of 'awareness' of the presence of transcendental 'love' negates it, so the only authentic love is a love of which no one is aware – no one including Krishnamurti himself, presumably.

For the sake of discussion, let us assume the validity of Krishnamurti's transcendental channelling, and take what he has to say at face value. This means that he is able to witness these phenomena in some realm beyond normality, yet has found a way – using our everyday language – to transmit these facts back to us foolish mortals. 'He' – transcendental Krishnamurti - is able to 'see' – without being aware of that seeing (which would automatically negate that seeing) - that 'awareness of love' is not real love, just as 'awareness of humility' is not real humility.

The only way that this type of explanation is going to make sense is if we become devotees, abandoning our ability to think clearly and coherently, and simply hoping that complete intellectual self-abnegation will deliver us to some hoped for higher spiritual plane. This means – as it always does in such situations – that the problem with Krishnamurti is not that he talks nonsense, but that we are too unspiritual to see the simple truth of what he is saying.

Of course it is important at this stage to acknowledge without reservation that, when it comes to trying to describe and illustrate elusive psychological and spiritual phenomena, it can often be necessary to employ forms of paradox and contradiction and illogicality, sometimes bordering on what might appear to sound like nonsense; at least to someone who doesn't understand the precise nature and difficulty of what is being explained. This is because many elements of metaphysical phenomena are characterised by multiple apparently contradictory features at one and the same time, and it is simply not possible to present an accurate portrayal of them without taking this into account. But if and when one does enter these realms, one is categorically obliged to explain, at each and every step of the way, not only why the boundaries of commonsense coherence are being challenged, but also which element of the explanation is causing the difficulty, and exactly why it is doing so. To fail to do so is not only to treat your audience as doltish devotees -- and therefore not possessing any form of intellectual capacity-- but also to treat any instruction as no more than an opportunity for self-aggrandising freewheeling, wherein you grant yourself poetic licence to say whatever you like, no matter how nonsensical, all under the guise of expounding a 'superior wisdom'.

Studying the transcriptions

Where does this leave us ? Krishnamurti's vast legacy of transcribed talks –- extending to 17 volumes or more -- are, from the point of view of anyone wanting to explore elemental and objective metaphysical truths, a complete waste of time. That he was able to convince 'major figures' – the Dalai Lama, Alan Watts, David Bohm and many others – to respect him as a source of wisdom is astonishing, given the easy availability

of his popular titles, and the simplicity of his language. He was not hiding behind difficult concepts and impenetrable specialist jargon: the crudity and absurdity of his thinking is plain for all to see, and you crash into his narrow and blinkered outlook within a few sentences of any one of his very many books.

For example, in 'Krishnamurti on Education' (1974), he begins in the first chapter to say:

> 'You know, you live in one of the most beautiful valleys I have seen. It has a special atmosphere. Have you noticed, especially in the evenings and early mornings, a quality of silence which permeates, which penetrates the valley? There are around here, I believe, the most ancient hills in the world and man has not spoilt them…'

This can be dismissed as an innocuous enough opening gambit – Krishnamurti being pleasantly polite to his juvenile audience – but in fact he is setting the scene for the kind of rhetorical pivot he liked to deploy at every opportunity:

> 'and wherever you go, in cities or in other places, man is destroying nature, cutting down trees to build more houses, polluting the air with cars and industry. Man is destroying animals; there are very few tigers left. Man is destroying everything because more and more people are born and they must have more space. Gradually, man is spreading destruction all over the world. '[4]

He then goes on to chide the audience for their unwitting complicity in this:

> 'And when one comes to a valley like this - where there are very few people, where nature is still not spoilt, where there is still silence, quietness, beauty - one is really astonished. Every time one comes here one feels the strangeness of this land, but probably you have become used to it. You do not look at the hills any more, you do not listen to the birds anymore and to the wind among the leaves. So you have gradually become indifferent.'

before going on to discourse, in general terms, about the nature of education:

> 'Education is not just to pass examinations, take a degree and a job, get married and settle down, but also to be able to listen to the birds, to see the sky, to see the extraordinary beauty of a tree, and the shape of the hills, and to feel with them, to be really, directly in touch with them.'

This is of course boilerplate New Age romanticism – nothing particularly criminal in that – but it's deeply disappointing in the hands of a supposedly influential 'educator'. At base it betrays an extraordinary lack of insight into the dynamics of experience – the unavoidable interplay between positive and negative, in which we have something engaging to struggle against and improve upon – as well as a peculiar ignorance towards the ongoing efforts made by humankind to enhance the quality of life for itself by

responding, in a very secular and non-spiritual way, to the challenges of pollution and waste and environmental degradation. Latching on to negativity and portraying the world as 'mad' and 'disintegrating' and all about 'fighting, quarrelling, bullying, tearing at each other' is as facile as the Old Testament idea of sex as the 'root of all evil'; or the idea that peace is good, conflict is bad; or the idea that all cities are bad and only the countryside is good: deploying crude binaries and simplistic negativities of this sort is indicative of very small mindedness as well as a kind of primitive insensitivity to nuance and subtlety.

The essence of the problem with Krishnamurti

To try to put the 'problem with Krishnamurti' into a word or two is not easy – thanks to his slippery and convoluted train of thought -- but it can be done. And it is all about first noticing – and then coming to see clearly – that, despite spicing his talks with regular rhetorical declarations – 'isn't it so ?' 'isn't that right ?' -- he never actually makes it clear what he is getting at, or what the point of all his explanations are. He never actually draws the various threads of his multifaceted arguments together, in order to say, 'this is exactly what I mean; and this is exactly how I can explain it.' He was forever sidestepping, and ducking and diving, and hopping from one idea to another; ultimately evading capture by alluding to a profound spiritual insight which we are required to accept that he was in possession of.

Perhaps the most damning evidence of Krishnamurti never getting to the point, and never answering the question, and channelling from on high, is a collection titled 'Questioning Krishnamurti' (1996) in which various luminaries, including Trungpa Rinpoche, Bernard Levin,

David Bohm, Ronald Eyre and Iris Murdoch, put soft questions to the master in the hope of illumination.

A sample:

Krishnamurti is discussing 'human experience' with Jonas Salk, an eminent Californian biologist and medical doctor:

> K: Human experience—just take human experience. We have had wars for probably ten thousand years or so. And in the old days you killed by arrows or club, two or three or a hundred people at the most. Now you kill by the million.
> JS: Much more efficiently.
> K: Yes, you are up in the air and you don't know whom you are killing. It might be your own family, your own friends. So has that experience of thousands of years of war taught man anything about not killing?
> JS: Well, it has taught me something. I see no sense in it, and there are growing numbers of people who are becoming conscious of the absurdity of that kind of behaviour.
> K: After ten thousand years! You follow me?
> JS: I follow you.
> K: We must question whether there is any learning at all or just blind wandering. After ten thousand years or so, human beings haven't learnt a very simple thing: don't kill somebody, that for God's sake, you are killing yourself, you are killing your future. And that hasn't been learnt.
> JS: It has been learnt by some but not all of us.

K: Of course there are exceptions. Let's leave the exceptions, they will always be there, fortunately.

JS: Fortunately, that's a very important point.

K: But the majority, who vote for war, for presidents, for prime ministers, and all the rest of it, haven't learnt a thing, they will destroy humanity.

JS: The ultimate destruction has not happened yet. You are quite right, but we need to become aware of that new danger, and something must arise within us now.

K: Sir, I would like to go into this because I am questioning whether experience has taught man anything, except to be more brutal, more selfish, more self-centred, more concerned with himself and his little group, his little family, or whatever. Tribal consciousness, which has become glorified as national consciousness, is destroying us. So if ten thousand years, more or less, has not taught man to stop killing, there is something wrong.

JS: I'd like to offer a suggestion, a way of looking at this question. I'd like to look at it from an evolutionary point of view, and speculate that we are evolving through a period of time, in which the exception to which you referred earlier may some day become the rule. Now how might this happen? It has to happen or else there will be nothing to speak about after the event.

K: Of course.

JS: We are confronting a crisis now. That crisis is imminent, it gets closer and closer.

K: Yes, sir, that's what we said.

JS: So that we may very well have to enter the arena ourselves in a conscious way. As we are fully conscious, aware of the risk and danger, some effort must be made, some way must be invented to raise the consciousness of the world as a whole, however difficult that may be.

K: I understand all this, sir. I have talked to a great many politicians and their argument is that you and people like you must enter the arena. Now, wait a minute. We always deal with a crisis, not with what has brought about the crisis.

When the crisis arises our response is: deal with the crisis, don't bother about the past, don't bother about anything else, just deal with the crisis.

JS: That's wrong.

K: That's what they are all doing.

JS: I understand that. And that's why they need the wisdom of those like yourself, who see the future, can see the 'handwriting on the wall', and will act before the wall begins to crumble.

K: So what I am saying is: shouldn't we inquire into the cause of all this? Nor just say, well, here is a crisis, deal with it.

JS: Yes, I agree with you.

K: That's what the politicians are saying. I mean the cause of all this is obviously the desire to live safely, protected, be secure inwardly. I divide myself as a family, then as a small group of people, and so on and so on.

JS: We are going to discover that we are all one family.

K: Ah!

JS: And our greatest security will come from being concerned about others in our family. It will be of no great advantage to us to have others suffer and be a threat to us as well as to themselves, which is the state of affairs now.

K: But I am pointing out that we haven't learnt through suffering, we haven't learnt from the agony of wars. So what makes us learn, change? What are the factors and the depth of it? Why are human beings, who have lived on it for so long, destroying this poor unfortunate Earth, and destroying each other? What is the cause of all this? Not speculations about the cause, but the actual, deep human cause? Unless we find that we will go on with this for the rest of our days.

JS: That's quite right. So you are asking about the cause.

K: Or causation that has brought man to this present crisis.

JS: As I see it, war is something that men engage in to satisfy the need for survival under circumstances of threat, when there is something to be gained by war. Now when the time comes when nothing is to be gained, and everything is to be lost, we may give a second thought to this.

K: But we have lost, sir. You understand? Every war is a lost war. Why haven't we learnt that? The historians, all the great scholars, have written about it and
man has remained tribal, petty, self-centred. So what will make him change? The immediacy of change, not gradually in the future, because time may be the enemy of man. Evolution may be the enemy.

JS: The enemy? Evolution may be the only solution.
K: If man hasn't learnt after all this suffering and is simply perpetuating this thing...
JS: He hasn't evolved sufficiently as yet. The conditions have not, as yet, been propitious for solving the problems that precipitate war.
K: Sir, if we have children, what is their future? War? And how am I, if one is a parent, how is one to see all this? How is one to awaken, to be aware of all that is going on, and of the relationship of our children to what is going on? And if they don't change this thing will go on endlessly.
JS: Therefore a change is imperative. How are we going to bring it about?
K: That's what I am asking. Change is imperative. But if the change depends on evolution, which means time and all the rest of it, we are going to destroy ourselves.

The key propositions from this etherealised waffle are – in no particular order, as the idea of a 'particular order' was never a feature of a Krishnamurti explanation - as follows: 'Every war is a lost war, and evolution is the enemy. Humankind is unable to learn after ten thousand years. The majority vote for war, and the politicians will destroy humanity. Man is tribal, petty, self-centred. We need to find the cause, but causation is the cause. Dealing with a crisis never solves a crisis. Change is imperative. But if the change depends on evolution, which means time and all the rest of it, we are going to destroy ourselves.'

It will again be argued that this passage – and the

summary - have been taken out of context, and that if we study what follows and precedes it we will be able to see the validity of Krishnamurti's teaching, and so on, but this is not the case. In fact, none of these 'dialogues' even rises to the level of 'pub talk'; Krishnamurti is – as usual – resting his authority on an allusion to his supreme realisation of a state 'beyond evolutionary and causational time' which offers salvation in a way that 'learning from experience in causational time' cannot; but instead of explaining its principles, and attempting to get the discussion on an equal footing, he is content – again and again -- to continue an exchange in which both parties argue at cross-purposes. It is characteristic of all his discussions that he deliberately holds back from explaining exactly what he means, so that he can the maintain the idea – necessary to his peculiar status as some sort of realised being – that he derives his knowledge from a noumenal realm inaccessible to the rest of us.

The 'Krishnamurti' metaphysical proposal, insofar as it can be identified and articulated:

But putting his distinctive misdirection and indeterminacy to one side, it is still possible to identify something like the principles of his theory of spirituality. As he portrayed it, there is a transcendental realm 'beyond knowledge' which affords those who can reconnect with it by negatively suppressing their capacity to think, a total 'freedom' from the woes of human existence, in particular 'fear' and 'conflict'. This freedom is 'ecstatic', as well as being characterised, through a mysterious 'reconciliation', by 'reason' and 'love'. And this realm of transcendental freedom is the realm of Truth, and everything else – especially our intellectual efforts and imaginings to attain it—are false.

How do we reach this transcendental realm ? Directly, by negating ourselves at our mental core, and letting the transcendental shine through of its own accord; anything that involves intellectual effort or volitional practice, being essentially 'false', cannot succeed in principle. But how exactly do we negate ourselves at essence, and bypass our hindering 'false self' ? You just *do* it; you can't think about it, or you remain the false self you are trying to overcome.

But far and away the most interesting and direct outcome of Krishnamurti's version of 'spiritual realisation' is its utter 'New Age eco-worldliness', in that it reveals itself to be entirely concerned with cherishing nature, and turning us into conflict-free beings full of love and harmony, no longer engaging in wars and aggression. Transcendental knowledge in Krishnamurti's terms is all about the optimal living of life as we know it, in which negativity has been banished, and in which a kind of luminous everyday intelligence holds sway. There is nothing here along Buddhist or Advaita lines about resolving the essential mystery of existence, or enlightening us as to the essence of knowledge itself; Krishnamurti's supposed spirituality is as curiously mundane as any self-help life coaching proposal could possibly be.

An explanation of his appeal

How then to 'explain' Krishnamurti ? How was he able to be taken so seriously ? As has been said before, Krishnamurti's overt appeal – at least in the west – has been as the 'anti-guru', and the 'no-nonsense guru', preaching eastern wisdom without the ethnic baggage. He always appeared to be getting to the point, and focussing on essentials, whereas other gurus would spin exoticism and hirsute psychedelia. He carefully avoided references to

transcendental states of consciousness, framing his talks instead around simple, everyday concepts, and this in turn gave his lectures a pseudo-scholarly feel. And over time he was able to present himself as a Montessori-type educational innovator, promoting something like 'a genuine search for real knowledge' in contrast to the dead hand of rote learning and exam passing.

And in common with many other successful gurus – the Maharishi was another -- Krishnamurti was ultimately offering a 'better life' in the here and now, through aligning ourselves with his realisations. He was not offering metaphysical insight; he was instead offering a clarity of mind which would solve worldly problems – like conflict, anxiety and attachment - and this is what was important to him. In this way he was appealing directly to the kind of widespread belief westerners have about the value of what they perceive to be 'spirituality': it should necessarily improve the quality of one's day to day life, otherwise it is worthless. The idea that insight into the elements of existence might lead to a fulfilment unrelated to worldly happiness and success is not something most people can relate to.

Now even in the hands of a hard taskmaster like Agehananda Bharati – himself a German convert to Hinduism, and someone who delighted in high standards of scholarship, and who was not afraid to call out celebrity swamis for their shameless egotism and lack of traditional knowledge – Krishnamurti was given a glowing reference:

> 'There is the famous, rather wonderful, aging J. Krishnamurti. He began as a theosophist, but he defected, an act of great insight….Krishnamurti has taught in America, Europe, and India…He has written

> many books, each of which makes sense…Krishnamurti has talked about meditation, sex, the unimportance of God, about yoga and about everything gurus talk about. However, there is a difference: he has never initiated people. He does not tell them to meditate, or not to meditate. He does not issue moral warrants, nor religious pep-talk like the swamis. But he does talk Vedanta – a highly sophisticated, modern, non-scriptural, but authentic kind of Vedanta. He is among the gurus of the world, a no-nonsense man – perhaps the only one….'[5]

And so on. It is clear from this that Bharati either knew very little about what Krishnamurti actually said and taught, or he was so seduced by his commanding style that his critical faculties deserted him. And characterising Krishnamurti's peculiarly worldly utopianism as an 'authentic kind of Vedanta' is bewildering: Shankaracharya's doctrine was certainly not all about how to lead a 'good life' in the here and now.

It is surely the whiff of the traditional schoolmaster – in his manner and style – which cemented his reputation for seriousness and profundity, mixing as it does the conservative idea of traditional discipline with the modernity of innovative thinking on matters educational. But sooner or later we need to go beyond the surface imagery and ask what it was that gave Krishnamurti the confidence to portray himself as spiritually knowledgeable, and exactly what set of ideas informed his thinking and his explanations of things.

And here we encounter Krishnamurti the 'mystic',

reaching spiritual conclusions on the basis of a series of experiences that happened to him at various stages in the earlier part of his life. We need to remember that although Krishnamurti went through hardships of a sort in his schooling, and also experienced bereavement and other traumatic events, he lived a relatively sheltered and pampered physical existence, never having to earn a living or face the stresses and conflicts and humiliations involved in everyday striving. This meant his understanding of spirituality was never challenged by anyone, encouraging him in turn to attach greater importance to his own mystical value than might otherwise have been the case.

He was also subject to an unacknowledged cruelty – inflicted on him by the theosophists – of being considered, at a young age, to be a future 'messiah'. He came to renounce this supposed 'honour' and to turn his back on theosophy, declaring 'that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect'[6], but in many ways the damage to his relationship with normality had already been done. The complete text of his renunciation of divinity and his subsequent dissolution of the 'Order of the Star in the East' -- built up around him -- is worth reading in full, in that it contains not only a statement of the mystical basis of this thinking, but also many examples of the poorly thought-through ideas he liked to think were valid conclusions to his deliberations.

Mystically speaking, Krishnamurti had this to say:

> 'A belief is purely an individual matter, and you cannot and must not organize it…[one needs to] break away from all limitations, for that alone will give him eternal happiness, will give him the unconditioned

> realization of the self….Because I am free, unconditioned, whole–not the part, not the relative, but the whole Truth that is eternal–I desire those, who seek to understand me to be free; not to follow me, not to make out of me a cage which will become a religion, a sect. Rather should they be free from all fears–from the fear of religion, from the fear of salvation, from the fear of spirituality, from the fear of love, from the fear of death, from the fear of life itself….I maintain that the only spirituality is the incorruptibility of the self which is eternal, is the harmony between reason and love. This is the absolute, unconditioned Truth which is Life itself. I want therefore to set man free, rejoicing as the bird in the clear sky, unburdened, independent, ecstatic in that freedom.'

This is classic 'swami-speak', mixing 'ecstasy' and 'freedom' and the 'unconditioned realisation of the Self'. And according to Krishnamurti the 'Unconditioned Truth' is 'Life itself', though 'free from all fears' – but, as any sceptic would ask, what kind of life is free of fear ? Not ordinary everyday life, obviously, so Krishnamurti must be talking about some kind of transcendental state of existence wholly removed from life, yet allowing the occupant to be present in life alongside the rest of us. And if this being had 'no fear', how would it know what it was like to be merely ordinary, and full of fear ? Presumably it would possess a memory of fear – from the bad old days before realisation – and be able to refer to that, but this would present all kinds of difficulties going forward. And more interestingly, how long could you survive in the world if you were wholly 'free from fear' ? If you saw an

object hurtling towards you, why bother to get out of the way ? And so on, indefinitely.

These quibbles night seem very petty when viewed from the perspective of a Krishnamurti devotee, but it's not difficult to see that, for any of this to make sense, we have to abandon normal scepticism and become believers of the very sort Krishnamurti did not want. The only way to resolve the problem of this transcendental incoherence would have been for Krishnamurti to have attempted to explain – in all the necessary detail -- how all these very many paradoxes and nonsensicalities could coexist, but of course he never bothered to, even over decades and decades of lecturing. Doubtless he wasn't aware of them.

Putting his essential conceptual paradox more brutally, isn't 'fear' an essential element in 'care' ? If I don't fear anything, do I still 'care' about anything ? Yet in this eternal state, according to Krishnamurti, there is a 'harmony between reason and love' – so presumably my 'care' becomes transformed into a fear-free transcendental love, but it's still not clear how this combined 'reason-love' gets to insert itself into our horrible fear-ridden universe without compromising its nature. And in his dissolution of the 'Order of the Star in the East' speech, Krishnamurti emphasised several times that 'my only concern is to set men absolutely, unconditionally free', yet it's not clear why he should be concerned about it – if he's free from everything, what difference does it make whether we're idiots or realised beings ? Why would that even be an important distinction ? And important to whom ?

Krishnamurti – and his many followers and devotees worldwide – like to think that they're getting undiluted insights into all things spiritual, and privileged access to all

things related to the good life. In fact all they're getting is nonsensical swami-speak and utopian New Age imaginings. Now it is true that schools have been set up in Krishnamurti's name, and this is a worthy achievement in its own right, – though it's impossible to believe with his entitled unworldliness that he was ever an active administrator – but there's nothing particularly spiritual about setting up schools, even if they're peddling New Age guff about a 'supremely intelligent movement':

> 'What is the movement that is supremely intelligent? I am using the word "intelligent," not clever, not intuitive, not derived from knowledge, information, experience. What is the movement that understands all these divisions, all these conflicts; and that very
> understanding creates the movement of intelligence?'

or presenting sentimentalised and unattainable goals:

> "How can we help that boy or girl to be free completely and yet highly disciplined, not through fear, not through conformity, not partially free but completely free and yet highly disciplined at the same time?"[7]

Summary and conclusions:

What can we learn from all this ? We know from the biographical studies[8] that Krishnamurti was brought up in a warped and extremely unhealthy environment – bordering on a kind of delusional insanity – and this combined with a series of mystical experiences of his own led him into a strange and

persisting indeterminacy, in which he rejected the practices and trappings of the swamis while embracing the transcendental channelling which afforded them their authority. He came to think of himself as the master of independent thinking, but it is clear from his utterances that he confused objective thought with dictatorial egotism, and believed that his style of freewheeling actually represented a type of consistent argumentation. And surrounded as he was all his life by eager devotees, he was never challenged on his views or forced to reconsider anything he said or thought. This is a guarantee of exactly the kind of flatulent self-righteousness that he came to represent.

Yet how was he able to achieve the status of 'one of the greatest thinkers of the age'[9] ? For the simple reason that there is no substantial tradition of objective spiritual metaphysics in western culture, and this means that any self-confident bloviator can set themselves up as a spiritual authority, encountering very little by way of meaningful opposition. In addition, Krishnamurti hit upon a winning persona combining schoolmaster with modern educationalist, and this veneer of traditional respectability managed to impress many educated westerners. That most of what he had to say was complete nonsense seemed to pass by unnoticed, the assumption being that any shortcoming in understanding is always the problem of the pupil-disciple, not of the holy man teacher. Western society continues to remain wholly vulnerable to the swamis and the lamas, and is as yet unable to adopt even a minimal objective scepticism towards their florid ramblings. The holies ply their trade unhindered until scandal overtakes them[10] and their audiences begin to have second thoughts, but even the idea of judging a teaching in terms of the 'moral propriety' or 'personal attractiveness' of the teacher is a naïve and unhelpful way to approach serious issues such as

spirituality and metaphysics: it is not the teacher that counts, or how you come by their teaching: it is what the teaching itself can reveal to you.

Tellingly, it doesn't even make sense to ask if there has ever been anyone who, having listened carefully to Krishnamurti, found themselves in possession of the kind of realisation he was talking about. This is because not only did his theory of spiritual realisation not make the least sense from any angle, but also because the whole thing, from start to finish, was entirely self-validating, and wholly solipsistic, and offered no means of objective intellectual scrutiny.

In the end, we can safely say that Krishnamurti has nothing to offer the serious student of independent, objective metaphysics. He may have founded various schools here and there, but setting up schools is not an indication of the presence of metaphysical insight. At best his vast body of writings is diverting nonsense; at worst he's wasting our time. He believed himself to be a focussed thinker, able to stick to the point; but because his formative years were spent with theosophists and other deranged occultists he was untutored in the exigent demands of intellectual discipline; and as a consequence knew nothing of scepticism, conceptual objectivity, or even basic conversational coherence. His appeal to those who want oriental wisdom without all the robes and sitars is understandable but seriously misplaced, and time and effort would be better spent in elementary metaphysical self-exploration, one step at a time, without Krishnamurti's misdirection and interference.

Endnotes:

[1] Transcript in the comment section below the video.

[2] Total Freedom, p.17.

[3] Freedom from the Known, p.128-129.

[4] Krishnamurti on Education, opening paragraphs of Chapter 1.

[5] The Light at the Centre, p.224-225.

[6] Full text of his speech at Ommen, Holland, in 1929.

[7] Krishnamurti on Education, Chapter 1 to Teachers.

[8] See the extensive studies by Mary Lutyens.

[9] Supposedly said by the Dalai Lama, and frequently quoted.

[10] There are now any number of books, films and newspaper reports cataloguing the inability of the saintly to avoid disgrace.

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5

Psychotherapy, psychological health, & self-fulfilment: a Buddhist perspective

Summary: The science of psychology is believed to consist of objective and meaningful knowledge about a realm of our own direct experiencing with which we are all intimate and familiar, yet about which we also feel we have very little understanding, and no real insight, and so feel inclined to submit to psychology as if it were revelatory and definitive. Society's default attitude to psychology is one of deferential, if occasionally grudging, respect. The quasi-medical arm of psychology – psychotherapy - is accorded a similar authority even when it appears to employ questionable methods and dubious reasoning. Yet our submissive, compliant attitude to these disciplines is deeply counterproductive to any serious quest for authentic metaphysical knowledge and self-fulfilment, because it effectively neutralises sceptical enquiry and intellectual self-reliance, both of which are essential precursors to, and indispensable features of, any meaningful

commitment to metaphysical gnosis. And if one is to achieve clarity of thought and observational accuracy, it is especially important to approach one's psychological capacities directly – without intermediary - in an independent and self-reliant spirit, free of the misguided and inappropriate interventions of psychology and psychotherapy, however well intended they might be. One should never allow one's judgement to be distorted by specious theories formulated by people who can never know more about you than you can know about yourself.

The simple truth is, if you want to 'know yourself' – that is, gain insight into your own inner mental capacities - you have to start by learning to observe your own personal experiencing directly, straightforwardly, and without any kind of conceptual or doctrinal intermediary. The theories you will find in psychology and psychotherapy will prevent you from doing this, because they do not encourage self-enquiry, and have been designed with quite different goals in mind. Psychology is wholly concerned with achieving scientific mastery over psychological functioning, whereas psychotherapy is only interested in actualising what amounts to a very trivial conception of everyday wellbeing. Psychology and psychotherapy are not, and never will be, concerned with ultimate self-fulfilment, or with metaphysical gnosis, as these ideals lie well beyond their furthest remit.

Disclaimer

Those now anticipating a swift descent into New Age mystical apologetics, especially of the sort which seeks to add chunks of supposed oriental wisdom to existing western disciplines, will find that what is being argued here is not that. Nor is it about contributing to 'exciting new trends' in neuropsychology, brain plotting and all the rest of it. This is

simply about analysing the most basic ideas we have about ourselves and our psychological capacities, and working outwards from there, avoiding flights of fancy wherever possible. There is really no other way to proceed: if you start with full-blown theories of one sort or another and then try to fine-tune them into some sort of intellectual cogency, you will end up exactly where psychology and psychotherapy are right now, which is very much on the defensive, and unsure of themselves.

To make this clear: the idea here is to examine generally-held conceptions of psychology and mental health with a view to arguing that they conceal a servile attitude to authority, and that this servility prevents people from exploring their own psychological experiencing for themselves. Which means that if one wants to embark on a genuine quest for self-knowledge, and for ultimate self-fulfilment, one has to develop intellectual self-reliance. The main focus of interest here is the quest for self-fulfilment – while using self-enquiry as the gateway to it - and not another futile discussion as to which theory of human psychology might be better than another.

Introduction

This short study will limit itself to examining – in a very simple and direct way - the key assumptions concealed behind the everyday, widely-held conceptions of psychology and psychotherapy, with a view to assessing their substantive value in the light of a wider quest for self-fulfilment. This is not about arguing that psychology and psychotherapy lack any worth under any circumstances, or about suggesting ways in which their effectiveness could be radically improved,

rather this is about making the difficult and challenging point that operating within these disciplines is inherently counterproductive and damaging when it comes to any genuine quest for metaphysical gnosis and ultimate self-fulfilment. This is because both disciplines muddy the waters with misdirected nonsense when one should instead be learning to observe things clearly and impartially for oneself, and developing the strength of mind to be able to come to independent conclusions.

Put in simpler terms, the quest for ultimate self-fulfilment begins with very basic self-enquiry. Who am I, and what do I want ? How can I be sure that what I think I want is actually what I want ? And how would I start trying to find out ? And so on. And dominating our ordinary lives are our psychological needs and desires, which seem to have a will of their own, and which compel us to behave in certain ways, whether we think we want to, or not. So in a very real way, we are possessed by our innermost needs and desires – they own us – yet we still feel we have some measure of control over events. So we both know ourselves, and yet we don't. Our psyches are a mystery to us, and we don't really know what they will do next. It is very tempting then to turn to the experts, and have them explain the situation to us. The problem is that the experts don't know any more than we do, and turning to them is a wasted opportunity to explore the facts for yourself. If you turn your mind's eye on to your psychological experiencing – your feelings, and your desires – what do you see ? How do they tell you what they want ? Would it make the least sense to ask someone else ? Please, Professor, look into my mind and tell me what I see ?

So if you want to know yourself psychologically, and if you want to find a way to fulfil yourself decisively, you will

have to abandon any and all dependence on other people's psychological theories, and learn to come to your own conclusions. The reasons for this are relatively straightforward: authentic metaphysical knowledge can only be achieved first-hand, directly; anything else is doctrine, and mediated, and someone else's idea; no matter how profound and compelling it might seem to you, and no matter how tightly you are holding on to it, and wishing it were true, and hoping that the strength of your wishing will magically effect some kind of cosmic realignment, and deliver to you whatever it is that you think you seek, without having to put yourself through anything that you really don't like. This is the essence of our compact with religious faith and sentimentality, and the basis of all prayer to higher powers; and it is an aspect of our experience we have to confront sooner or later, and admit to ourselves that it basically 'doesn't work'. We try to 'believe' our way through life, forcing our experience to conform to ideas we like, yet having in the end to admit defeat, because reality wins out. So the sooner we abandon various doctrines - psychological, metaphysical and religious - the sooner we can get on with the real task of seeing what we actually see, and working out what is actually what.

Methodology & definitions

This study is about making a case from, as it were, first principles. We are trying to keep everything as clear and simple as possible, and not to hide inadequacies of understanding and observation behind scholarly subterfuge. In other words, we are arguing a case on the basis of a few key facts, while appealing to a very primordial appreciation of independence of mind, and directness of perception. All else is meretricious waffle.

'Psyche' is defined here as our capacity for psychological experiencing, meaning that part or realm of our everyday experiencing which consists of our feelings and our emotions. These feelings and emotions are characterised by a certain autonomy and self-coherence, which justifies their being characterised as located in a certain distinctive realm of their own. It is not going too far to describe our psychological experiencing, insofar as it manifests itself with depth and power, as being our 'soul', although understood in a strictly non-religious sense.

In the same vein, a few words need be said about the concepts 'popular' and 'widespread', with regard to the ideas of psychology and psychotherapy represented here. Beyond describing what these ideas supposedly consist of, it is not possible or meaningful to attempt to substantiate them with statistics, or polling data, or other forms of quasi-scientific evidence: one either accepts that they are more or less accurate, or one does not. So a certain measure of intellectual indulgence is called for. But in any event none of the conceptions under discussion here is likely to stretch credulity.

And it might seem misguided to focus on commonly-held views when we should perhaps direct ourselves to more sophisticated perspectives, but the surprising fact is that - in this specific instance - the popular, prejudicial ideas are far more instructive and revealing than informed conceptions, in that they have not been consciously 'coached', and 'improved upon'. Widely-held ideas on psychology and psychotherapy show us what people in the real world actually think, and they accurately reveal what most people believe is the appropriate relationship between themselves and the 'headshrinkers' who are professionals in the field. And regarding the label

'head-shrinker', it is worth reminding ourselves that many people – including those university educated – believe that psychology is basically the science of mental health, and are quite unaware of the fact that most of what actually constitutes psychology has nothing to do with mental illness, and that the clinical field itself is surprisingly remote from the mainstream. That people don't know this might seem to count against the idea of using popular conceptions as our starting point, but it is not the accuracy of the conception which is the key factor, it is the fact that people believe it, and that they respond to it as if it were true.

So it is the way that most people respond to the idea of 'psychology' – as a shorthand for the whole realm of mental health – that is of crucial interest here, because it sets up, encourages and exploits a particular kind of relationship between ordinary people and those so-called 'in the know'; and this relationship is deeply counterproductive when it comes to basic self-knowledge, let alone the quest for metaphysical truth. This whole issue needs to be explored in some detail, because the correct starting point for the acquisition of self-knowledge should not be arrived at by rhetorical persuasion, but rather as a matter of something like an 'intellectual instinct', which should rightly be awakened at the outset of any and every kind of inner analysis and investigation. If you cede judgement in crucial matters of self-knowledge to others, how can you ever know anything directly for yourself ? And if you don't want to know things directly for yourself, why bother with introspection at all ?

The label 'Buddhist' being employed here is meant to refer to any characteristically independent, unmediated quest for ultimate self-fulfilment, which is itself understood to be of a metaphysical order. From this Buddhist – buddhistic -

perspective, all human endeavour is, one way or another - and irrespective of how halfheartedly or misguidedly - directed towards its ultimate self-fulfilment. Such a quest has little or nothing to do with Buddhist religion, which is basically a religion like any other, consisting of misdirected doctrine, ineffective practice and irredeemable stupidity, all of which deliberately conspire to keep the hapless devotee from any direct engagement with the facts themselves, in case they discover their religion to be no more than a worthless delusion. A genuinely buddhistic quest is directed towards metaphysical 'gnosis' – that is to say, directly apprehended knowledge of a metaphysical order – and not towards any kind of worldly success or worldly achievement as ordinarily understood.

It will clearly not be possible to do more than outline the key ideas and their most basic interrelationships, as a full account would require many more pages of explanation and justification. And the details of any proposed solution to a mediated encounter with one's inner capacities – namely a direct engagement with them – can only be sketched in outline, and will have to be more fully explained elsewhere[1].

The idea of a body of knowledge called 'psychology'

Psychology in its present form is a relatively new science – not more than a hundred and fifty years old – though this aspect of its history is not in itself particularly surprising, given that most of our modern sciences are in a constant state of redefinition. What is surprising is that we as a human species do not seem to have much by way of cumulative historical knowledge when it comes to psychology, and we

still, after thousands of years of recording our thoughts on all subjects, continue to find our psyches a troubling mystery. There are many who would consider the very notion of a 'psyche' to be mistaken, so little do we understand about our emotional realm. And beyond the obvious and trivial, we are still nowhere near to any agreement as to what causes what, or what is located where, or how the whole psychological thing holds together, let alone how best to achieve wellbeing and self-fulfilment.

And these facts go hand in hand with a couple of interesting paradoxes. Despite the fact that we blunder around in the dark, psychologically speaking, we readily believe that those who are trained in psychology are in possession of secret knowledge that the rest of us are not, and that we should give the whole enterprise our unconditional respect. And at the same time as unquestioningly swallowing wholesale whatever psychological research tells us, we also like to joke that anyone who is involved in psychology is probably mentally ill.

It is common knowledge that you can go to more or less any university offering generalist subjects and study there to be a psychologist, and that this will require many years of training. There are heavyweight books – in both senses of the term – on psychology in libraries and in bookshops; so you would be forgiven for thinking that it is a very substantial field of knowledge, and that those who have degrees in the subject must know an awful lot about something, even if they are still in the bloom of youth, and not yet turned 25. 'Psychologist' is a regulated profession in most advanced countries, indicating that the knowledge possessed by a person with that sort of title is much more comprehensive and thorough than could be achieved by

interested amateurs and dilettantes, and should rightfully be protected from the depredations of chancers and the self-appointed.

To demystify the subject comprehensively would be a fascinating undertaking in its own right, but way beyond the scope of this essay. We need to be charitable and assume that the hundreds of thousands of practicing psychologists around the world actually know something that the rest of us don't; or, if that is going too far, that they are capable of doing something – even if it is only employing the latest psychological jargon – that the rest of us are justifiably not empowered to do, and so deserve their special status. The point here is not to denigrate the idea of scientific psychological knowledge or specialist training as such, but rather to understand how this knowledge is viewed by society at large, and whether or not a reverential attitude towards psychology is helpful to someone who really wants to get to grips with their own psychological reality, as part of a quest for ultimate fulfilment. In the context of our very unreflective and celebrity obsessed society, 'ultimate fulfilment' may sound like a laughably grandiose and pretentious turn of phrase, but when it comes down to it, is there anything else worth striving for ?

But if we accept – for now – that psychology exists as a meaningful discipline, and that a trained psychologist possesses knowledge that a non-psychologist does not, we can then examine the nature of the relationship between 'ordinary educated people' and psychology itself. 'Psychology', as it is currently constituted, unavoidably characterises those outside of its initiatory inner circle as suffering from a type of gormless ignorance, unable to understand the simplest of situations, and regularly needing

to have life explained to them. 'Psychology tells us'[2] is a common enough phrase even in highbrow media, and psychologists are regularly being called upon to clarify the 'psychology' of an event – usually a matter of describing hidden motivations – which would somehow otherwise remain mysterious and unexplained, and something the population at large wouldn't be able to get their heads around. And in this interpretative way, psychology becomes an accepted 'final explanation', beyond which nothing further can or need be said: if the psychologists don't have an answer, then no one does. At least, so the story goes.

Of course this is only one side to the regular appearance of psychologists in the media, because expertise – of whatever sort – acts as a shorthand for the conveying of large amounts of information, as well as giving definition to accounts which might otherwise be very shapeless. It is not the fault of the 'expert' that they are wheeled out to explain to us slack-jawed spectators what is going on; part of that is down to the way we like our narratives fashioned. But the point is not the form or content of the narrative, it is the way we defer to certain elements in it, as if we are not capable of working these things out for ourselves. Society has definitely acquiesced to the perceived authority of the psychologist, as a spokesperson for the imposing body of knowledge called 'psychology'.

From the point of view of anyone simply making their way through life as best they can, deferring to psychological 'wisdom' does not represent a problem, or even something worth spending much time on. Life has its own complications, and if someone is capable of working the system, and having themselves declared as an expert, then so be it. And if their expertise is a sham, then so be that too, because so much of

life is a sham, and experts are just people who have succeeded where others have failed. And after all, there are august regulatory bodies to supervise this kind of thing, and if they are not capable of dealing with the situation, then who is ? And so on.

But if we are motivated to try to understand the world we live in, and more specifically to understand the features of our basic metaphysical predicament, then we need to realise - as urgently as possible - that the first step to genuine knowledge always involves learning to put aside doctrines of any kind, especially those which in any way appear to disclose to us how we experience things, and how we process those experiences. These 'doctrines' are the most pernicious forms of teaching, because even if they are accurate – and almost all of them are not – they do your thinking for you, and seemingly remove the need for you to think for yourself. You shouldn't need to be told that your mind works in a certain way – you should have a look for yourself, and see if it does. And if you don't have the strength of mind to look for yourself, you need to try and find a way to work towards that strength, so that at some stage in the future you will be more self-reliant, and more capable of independent, objective judgement. These are not impossible, world-shatteringly difficult undertakings – anyone can do them, with a bit of patience, and a bit of resolve. The fact that very few people can be bothered is a testament, not to their difficulty, but to the fact that people don't value thinking for themselves, and coming to their own conclusions. There is always something cosy and reassuring about repeating platitudes and staying within the herd.

The self-reliant, independent approach to psychology is not organic to the discipline itself, as psychology is often deeply authoritarian and prescriptive in its ethos, as can

easily be understood from its scientistic, carefully-regulated procedures, and from the strictures of the many regulatory bodies which oversee its workings. Unknown to the world at large, psychology - within its countless specialisations - is riven with competing factions, all striving – albeit through scholarly jostling – for some kind of decisive dominance, so as to have their particular angle on things declared authoritative, and everyone else relegated to the margins. All this is very normal and unremarkable – this sort of thing happens in every field of human endeavour everywhere - except that in the case of psychology there is also a deep and persistent underlying uncertainty as to whether psychology is really anything substantial at all, and not just an impressive label for a lot of tawdry chatter. The confident public front – invariably buttressed with interminable misleading experiments[3] and statistical 'evidence' - is as much about convincing itself as it is about convincing the rest of us poor bewildered onlookers.

The point here is to make clear how a person who really wants to know the truth about their psychological capacities ought properly to relate to what is commonly understood to be the science, or discipline, of 'psychology'. And this relationship ought to be predicated on a kind of relentless scepticism, only ever consulting psychology – as a matter of legitimate interest, to see what other people have to say – after the event, after one has come to one's own judgement, quite independently of prevailing intellectual opinion, and fashion. Contrasting one's own judgements with those of others, including the psychological establishment, would not be a matter of deciding who's right or wrong, but a matter of working through issues in the most direct, unbiased and objective way, observing what your experience tells you about yourself, and then getting another perspective on it, as

part of a wider quest for insight. Starting out by taking what other people have to say about the way your mind works and then filtering your experience through those ideas – destroying and distorting your clarity of perception in the process – is self-defeating, as well as demeaning: you have your own capacity for independent thought – so why not use it ? Why persist with the received conviction that you are intellectually crippled – incapable of seeing the obvious - and can't work anything out for yourself ?

Submission to authority may, in the course of life, go hand in hand with many schemes for self-preservation and self-advancement – from religions to everyday philosophies of how to get things done – but it does not go with Buddhism. At least, not with the spirit of genuine Buddhism – the buddhistic outlook - which promotes independence of mind, self-reliance, and scepticism towards any and every kind of doctrine, including – of course - what might be seen as the hidden agenda of the buddhistic quest itself, because after all, relentless scepticism and self-reliance might well be a recipe for disaster, so even that line of thought has to be subject to constant scrutiny.

So we've ended up in a situation where, if we're genuinely interested in the truth of our own personal psychological functioning, and genuinely interested in gaining a greater insight into the features of our own human condition, we have to abandon the hand-me-down theories of psychology – all of them, without exception - no matter how seductive and convincing, and learn to observe ourselves as objectively and independently as possible.

Naturally enough this assumes that we, as independent and unbiased observers of our own inner realm

of feelings and emotions, will have something meaningful and tangible to observe, once we have abandoned all our cherished pop psychology beliefs. What happens if we look into ourselves and see absolutely nothing meaningful at all ? Or if we are simply unable to interpret what we see without grabbing at bits of garbled Freudianism and lumpen platitudes we've heard off the radio ? In such a situation – which is very likely to happen to begin with – we have to develop our own multifaceted strategy for negotiating the apparent incomprehensibility of our own psychological outpourings. This is an overblown way of saying that we have to learn to accept what we see, and if we see nothing, or nothing that we can make sense of, we have to learn to accept that too. We have to learn, for example, to ask ourselves why – for reasons other than mental laziness or our own inability to think for ourselves – we feel lost without the reassurance of some overarching authoritative theory, no matter how demanding that theory on our credulity ? And if we don't really see anything, why do we feel we are 'getting somewhere' by reading an account in a book which tells us what we should be seeing ? Why, for example, did the world absorb the whole Freudian project – with all its patent idiocies - so easily ? Why, in the same vein, is the astonishing character classification 'anal[4]' [meaning anally retentive, meaning fussy about detail] such a popular form of psychological label among certain educated people ? Do any of those who use the term to describe themselves - and others - have any interest in what it was originally meant to explain, or more importantly, whether or not this explanation is accurate and helpful ? Do they really care ? The answer is of course no, and it is somewhat misguided even to ask that kind of question, because much of what is employed in the service of psychological explanation is just a form of conversational poetry – colourful rhetoric – which supposedly sounds

informed, and perceptive, and in this case, brutally candid, but whose actual meaning is largely irrelevant. The concept 'anal' has been handed down to us from on high, and we cheerfully go along with it, believing it to represent the perspicacity of much greater minds than ours. You really couldn't make it up if you tried.

At this stage we want to summarise this discussion by reducing it to these key interconnected points:

(1) even if we accept that the discipline called psychology - which offers us ready-made explanations of our psychological functioning - has something relatively useful to teach us,

(2) we ought always to pursue our own personal psychological self-knowledge independently of pre-existing doctrines, avoiding them wherever possible,

(3) because we cannot hope to gain insight into the metaphysical realms of our being if we have failed to learn how to explore – independently of other people's ideas, theories and doctrines – our own mental capacities, starting with our psychological experiencing.

Metaphysical knowledge and insight is not a function of psychological exploration – it is of a different modality altogether – but you could not possibly embark on serious metaphysical study without first having proved to yourself your own ability to explore the information supplied to you daily by your own psyche.

Psychological health: adequacy, sanity, normality

But if 'psychology' turns out to have been something

of an enticing distraction, offering us temptations that we need to treat with the utmost suspicion and scepticism, does this mean we are then condemned to being lost in space, freefalling until such time as we have worked out our own plan of action ? Not necessarily, because we can ground ourselves at the outset by means of some very basic everyday ideas already in current use which don't derive their content from the formal discipline of psychology, even if they might appear to.

The most useful yet provocative of these ideas is that of everyday psychological health or, to portray it in its most recognisable form, simply 'being normal'. 'Being normal' is a useful idea for specifying a practical and realistic context in which anyone ought to be able to function; and it is provocative in the sense that, when systematically examined, it begins to reveal key aspects of any quest for self-fulfilment which are easily overlooked.

We can define 'being normal' by means of a kind of loose triangulation, involving the additional ideas of 'adequacy' and 'sanity'. 'Adequacy' means being able to function in life to the point where there are opportunities for reflecting on what it will take for self-fulfilment, and 'sanity' means being able to put these reflections to practical use in such a way as to avoid extremes. Adequacy could include a vast array of lifestyles, from being rich to being homeless - including along the way being forcibly institutionalised - the only requirement being that any particular lifestyle, however deprived, degraded or sublime, affords the individual the chance to reflect slowly and systematically on life and existence, such that they could begin to enact those ideas which they might believe would lead to ultimate self-fulfilment. The point here being that ultimate self-fulfilment –

an issue of a metaphysical order – bears no relation to wealth or social status, and can instantiate itself under more or less any conditions, and in more or less any circumstances.

The quality of 'sanity' – as a necessary feature of healthy normality - is even more interesting in its implications. It might appear at first to be a straightforwardly medical matter, but in fact – in the way it will be defined here - it has little or nothing to do with medical pathology: it is essentially about maintaining a balance in what one does, and never going too far in any direction, while anchoring oneself in the most mundane and banal aspects of everydayness. Why ? Because the tedious, the ordinary and the routine are the indisputable gold standards by means of which you can tell exactly where you are, and that you haven't left the planet, and that you're no more special than anyone else, and that you are still subject to the everyday laws of the universe. Those who fail to recognise the privilege of everyday ordinariness and strive to propel themselves permanently – by meditation, moral goodness, narcotics, prayer, or whatever – into altered realms of consciousness, supposedly in pursuit of divinity, enlightenment, or astral travel, do not appreciate that if you damage your fragile links to tedious normality, you will have no means of knowing whether you have made progress, or gone backward, or are losing your mind. And for those who have somehow managed to achieve permanent states of transcendental cosmic bliss, and couldn't care less about the how or the why – then good luck to them - but they have situated themselves at the opposite end of the spectrum from anything like metaphysical gnosis, or the possibility of authentic self-fulfilment.

An important feature of everydayness which we need to identify, as it is easily overlooked, is that of the necessity of

'being in the midst of it' or, to put it more crudely, 'up to your neck in it'. And this means being in regular contact with other ordinary and not so ordinary people, and having to acknowledge their existence, and having to put up with their demands. It is a great mistake to isolate yourself from other people, and cut yourself off from the relentless and unavoidable difficulties, conflicts and humiliations you will likely experience if you are properly a part of the human social world; and this exposure to negativity is a valuable corrective to all kinds of mistaken ideas about life and existence that can easily take root if you live in a world of your own making, remote from the egocentric and grossly selfish ambitions of others. This does not mean that you have to throw yourself in the very front line of social life, but it does mean that you have to know about life on the streets, and in the shops, and on public transport. There is plenty there to stop you getting unrealistic ideas about your value to the universe, and how you could save the planet if people would only follow the ideas you believe in. Witnessing the selfishness and stupidity of others is but an instant away from seeing exactly the same, or more likely worse, in yourself. Being in regular contact with other people is also valuable in subjecting you to the requisite amount of stress, which in turn sharpens your wits, and keeps your feet on the ground. Persistent stress, in moderation, is desirable.

And if we understand everyday mental healthiness – just being normal – as this balance between adequacy and sanity, is there any way of securing this as your permanent condition, as opposed to your being condemned to a state of perpetual uncertainty ? In other words, is there any way to guarantee, or safeguard, normality ? Given the general direction of travel – towards ultimate self-fulfilment – it is possible to make a few observations, based on a kind of

coherence of purpose, which will help to justify why embarking on a genuine quest for self-fulfilment might rightly secure itself.

But at the start we have to acknowledge that there is only so much you can do for yourself -by yourself - and that beyond that, life itself will have to give you a helping hand. This reciprocal relationship extends from worldly situations we get caught up in, to states of mind we find ourselves having to endure. In exactly the same way that we know that it makes plain and simple sense, if you want to improve some aspect of your worldly environment, to keep looking for ways that could potentially lead to such improvements, and that by doing this you will eventually secure them, by a sort of mysterious logic that no one can prove decisively, but which somehow we know to be true. This is not the same as believing, in an adolescent way, that 'if you really want something badly enough, you will definitely get it' – this is a much more realistic assessment, based in everyday experience, that a certain persistent, directed, effort always pays off; and that, even if you don't get everything you wanted, you can be guaranteed of a better outcome than if you didn't do anything to help yourself.

And if this works for trying to get a job, or trying to find a partner, or getting control of household finances, it also works for creating a frame of mind conducive to the kind of minimal optimism needed for a very basic engagement with the world, such that things can be done, days got through, lists ticked off, weekends reached, and life lived. This might seem a ridiculously modest way to look at your existence – embarrassingly pathetic even - given the lifestyles of the rich and famous that are constantly being celebrated in the media, but these lifestyles are a form of absurdist entertainment, not

a reflection of anything meaningful. Real life is very much more humble, and difficult, and unexciting. Real life is more of an ordeal than a pleasure. People with any sense know this, despite everyone desperately pretending otherwise. So behind the effusive displays of delight that are compulsory in our society - and in many cases because of them - most people are quietly tormented by the sense that they are being mysteriously excluded from all the fun and games, and that this must mean that there is something seriously wrong with them. In fact there is nothing wrong with them, and nothing to be tormented about: ordinary life is in reality something of a grim process for all of us.

There are also two factors relating to people who are serious about tackling the 'big questions' in life which ought to be pointed out here. One: that people who are sincerely attuned to issues larger than wealth, fame, and worldly success will by their very nature be possessed of a certain curious sensitivity which makes them unsuited to fiercely extraverted lifestyles; and two: more importantly – if you are trying to orientate yourself in life, for whatever reason, and with whatever goal in mind, you need to learn to appreciate the basics, and those basics are very basic indeed. And the most basic of the basics is just being able to muster enough mental energy to get you through the day, so that you can relax in front of the television with a drink for an hour or two before going to bed, so that you can start the whole vaguely arduous process over again tomorrow, all the time looking forward to the weekend. There is not a lot more to it than that, and if you find this portrayal of life grotesquely underpowered – horrifically depressing even - then you are most probably not much interested in finding a way to resolve the mystery at the heart of it: you are probably quite content with the idea of life as the mere pursuit of your own pleasure

and success, and why not, if that's the way you are ? Enjoy yourself. As for the rest of us, just keep going: there is an ultimately fulfilling 'way out', but for some reason it chooses not to reveal itself just like that.

But returning to the point, which is how to justify that the triangulation of sanity, adequacy and normality will become a reassuring and reliable context in which to situate yourself, this depends to a great extent on the overall direction of your travel. Life will always feel as though it is just about to collapse – it is in its very nature to do so – and half the battle, getting through the day, is to manage to keep this feeling at bay, by immersing yourself in whatever it is you think and feel you need to do. Your selfimposed task might be to try to make more money, or to secure your family relationships, or to keep the house clean – the nature of the task itself does not matter – what matters is that you have something you consider meaningful to do, which is something meaningful to fill up the long hours between the good times, and the times when you can reflect deeply, and purposively, on what life is all about.

A commitment to metaphysical gnosis: self-help as self-psychotherapy

Now the difference between a dreadful, arduous existence on the one hand, and an existence which is tolerably interesting on the other - with some fleeting moments of great pleasure and joy – is all down to a very explicit decision – in your own mind, and just between you and yourself - to commit yourself to the quest for metaphysical knowledge, whereby you transform everything that happens to you, physically and mentally, into an opportunity to search for

deeper insights into life, existence, and the universe. You reposition yourself – reorientate, recalibrate yourself - and in doing so you not only lighten the load of life, you make the whole process of living at least marginally more interesting, and you give yourself something to work towards, whether or not you think you are likely to achieve anything wonderful in the end. The value of this kind of perspective cannot be overestimated – it reaches to your very roots – and it accords with something of our deepest, innermost nature. It feels right, from whatever angle. In its own way, this is the highest possible form of self-help, and it constitutes, if you like, an unassailable instance of self-psychotherapy. This has nothing to do with religion and holiness, and it completely transcends your likes and dislikes, pushing you towards a level of objectivity and impartiality which will surprise you when you eventually come to notice it.

And more to the point, this type of self-acknowledged metaphysical commitment will not isolate you from bad experiences, and the negativity of life, nor should it – after all, life would be extremely boring without there being nightmarish stuff to avoid – but it does allow you to look at things in such a way as to turn life into a quest, and into an ongoing search for the holy grail of metaphysical gnosis, and almost into a kind of adventure.

But we have to be careful here not to overplay the sense of adventure that might come with an inner commitment to the quest for metaphysical self-fulfilment, because if you take things seriously you will see that it is simply not possible to treat your life as a game which you can easily put back in the cupboard when you start to feel things going wrong. And things can get very rough indeed, and you can, on occasion, feel all your most reassuring and

dependable thoughts slipping through your fingers, leaving you with nothing to hold onto at all. You can find yourself stripped of everything, and in despair. But if you've honestly committed yourself to an ongoing quest for greater knowledge and insight, you will - because of your inner commitment - also discover that you are able to recover from catastrophic despair relatively quickly and easily, and be able to say to yourself, 'That was exceptionally bad, I wonder what went wrong that time ?' It's a completely different perspective from someone who puts all their faith in material and social success in life, and is committed to that. When things go wrong for such people, and they eventually do - as they eventually do for all of us without exception – their prospects are very bleak indeed. How many of the beautiful people make it through life unscathed ? Only the very stupid ones.

There are obviously many similarities between the approach to life generated by a buddhistic quest like this and any type of deeply held conviction, whether it be political, or religious, or philosophical. If you suffer everything for the sake of Jesus, Muhammad, or Ron Hubbard, you can achieve miracles, no doubt about it. But you can achieve miracles by committing yourself to a political cause as well, as you can even with a simple love affair. You can also achieve miracles by working in the computer industry: the internet itself is nothing short of unbelievably miraculous. But the quest for self-fulfilment and metaphysical gnosis is not about finding a way to toughen up your inner resources, making you so resilient you can withstand any catastrophe; it is about connecting you with your inner resources in such a way that you are in an unimprovable relationship with them, allowing them to function with clarity and purpose. And if there is a better way of going about the whole process of fulfilling yourself, you will surely come across it sooner or later,

because you are not distorting your thinking or damaging your mental capacities by forcing them to operate according to a religious or philosophical doctrine. You remain open minded, alert, flexible, ready for anything.

And perhaps the most important feature of a wholehearted commitment to metaphysical gnosis – or to put it more plainly, to realising the highest possible fulfilling knowledge – is that such a commitment accords with the most stringent and demanding possible standards of your intellect: you are not demeaning yourself by striving for less than the best, for less than is adult. You are not begging for mercy, or trying to slime your way into some creator's good books, or just generally being immature, and sentimental, and unctuous. You're not giving in to the silliness of your heartfelt yearnings, which you've been clinging on to from your childhood. You're doing what any adult human should do, which is to stand up for yourself, and take on the challenge of life and existence. We all have the resources to do this, but we fall by the wayside through a lack of determination, and an inability to pick ourselves up after a few bad punches. Your 'self-narrative' – your account of yourself to yourself – doesn't have to be marvellously and admirably consistent – occasional periods of cowardice and laziness and feebleness are in order: we are human, after all – but you do have to find a way somehow to keep at it, to get back to the task at hand when you've had your moments of defeat, and self-doubt.

A quick word about grounded normality and everydayness: this is not a doctrine about tedious moderation and dull abstinence. There is nothing wrong with 'losing it' occasionally – in accordance with your capacities for recovery – as long as you can regain it for 'going to the office' on Monday morning. What would be wrong would be to believe

that extremism of any sort leads to anything significant in spiritual terms: it only leads to a damaging of the capacities you depend on for all forms of judgement, whether worldly or metaphysical.

To summarise: we are examining the concept of psychological health – psychological normality – and characterising it as the capacity not only to lead a relatively fulfilling normal life, but also, more importantly, as an opportunity to reflect, slowly and systematically and purposefully, on what you need to do to fulfil yourself in some kind of conclusive, decisive way. In other words, to achieve your 'ultimate fulfilment'. We are aspiring to go beyond relative fulfilment – that is, mere success in worldly terms – because we know that it is inadequate to our deepest needs, and unable to offer more than a temporary sense of satisfaction. Sanity, adequacy and everyday ordinariness are the necessary and indispensable features of the basic everyday context within which we ought to ground ourselves, and within which we need to move and breathe, and to which we need to return as soon as we feel ourselves drifting away from it. And the contention here is that if you commit yourself – in the service of a higher quest - to a type of bog standard normality, keeping it all very plain and simple and grounded, you should, almost by necessary default, be guaranteed of something like ongoing psychological health; at least, guaranteed as far as anything can be: human life is a very fragile and uncertain predicament, and nothing can ever be taken for granted.

Psychotherapy and self-fulfilment

On the basis of what has been argued above, we can move towards the conclusion that the whole idea of

psychotherapy – in the light of any quest for ultimate self-fulfilment – is essentially counterproductive and self-defeating. If you cannot find a way to deal with your own inner experiencing, you will surely be wasting your time trying to tackle wider questions about life and existence as a whole; questions which of their very nature require levels of clarity and objectivity which, if you think you can achieve them, you would be well advised to apply to your understanding of your own psyche.

This conclusion may seem more than a little blunt when set up against what is unquestionably a respectable profession, overseen by responsible governing bodies, and informed by a discipline – psychology – which is itself committed to objective and scientific procedures. But if we set aside the undeniable respectability, and return again to asking simple questions about a basic understanding of psychotherapy, working from first principles, we can discover some interesting facts about ourselves.

We need at this stage to point out a characteristic feature of our individual psychologies which, when all else could be said and done, is what keeps the whole 'psychology industry' in business. And it is the peculiar fact that, despite our psyches being an intimate and very familiar part of us - and at the same time giving rise to these very experiences of intimacy and familiarity – they are also potentially as mysterious and unknown to us as anything could possibly be. We all come to know, from experience, what our own personal emotional and sentimental responses are - under normal situations - though of course we reserve the right to surprise ourselves when it comes to extremes. And we generally like to stay within the confines of the familiar – the so-called comfort zone – because we don't want, or like, what

we don't want, or don't like. But our psyches don't appear to care what we want and like, and occasionally put us through distressing experiences, often without warning, and very often without explanation. In other words, our psyches can, under their own authority, subject us to experiential states which, despite the fact that the psyche is supposed to be something like our private 'possession', are life-threatening in their intensity, and which render us incapable of functioning in any meaningful way. In other words, if your own psyche turns against you – for whatever reason – you are in trouble. It can also disable you in what is considered a positive way, flooding you with rapture, and causing you to lose touch with your surroundings, in what the Hindus call 'God-intoxication'. Something very similar – in both positive and negative examples - can be achieved using narcotics.

So we have our everyday psychological capacity, which we generally consider benign, and in which we normally 'reside' and experience our lives, and we have the 'out-of-the-comfort-zone' psyche, which lies just around the corner, and which we do our best not to provoke. And it is this sense of an uncertain negative presence, distantly threatening our wellbeing, and always lurking just out of reach, which leads us, quite justifiably, to think that we don't really know ourselves, and that we best leave psychology to the professionals. After all, might not the explanation for the horrific behaviour of some people be that the lurking presence, instead of remaining somewhere distant, suddenly decides to occupy our everyday mind, and turn us into monsters ? And why can't I make myself feel happier, despite the fact that I've read all the books, and even attended lectures by happiness experts ? It's because my mind is not really my own, and I can't work things out for myself, and who knows what would happen if I decided to 'psychoanalyse' myself: I

would surely cause my whole mental structure to collapse in on itself. Best leave it to the professionals, even when they take the form of an immature and empty-faced youngster, just out of adolescence, but replete with degrees and certificates.

There is also the sense of relief and reassurance which comes from abdicating responsibility to someone you have decided knows better than you. It is not that they *do* know better – no easy way of telling – but rather that you have decided they do. Your decision may have been made on the basis of a recommendation, or more likely, on the fact that they occupy a position in some kind of authoritarian hierarchy, and you hand the rest over to fate. And of course the simple, unanswerable fact is that you would never get anywhere in life if you were sceptical, as a matter of principle, about the competence of each and every declared professional you came across – you sometimes *have* to go with the flow, and take some things on trust. It seems to work most of the time, and the world seems to be functioning quite well, and getting better all the time. At least for some of us.

But this kind of functional pragmatism – deferring to authorised professionals - is fine when it comes to consulting your GP about a persistent rash, or getting a technician to fix the boiler, or taking advice from the bank on your finances, but it has no place whatsoever – none - when it comes to exploring your own psychology. To seek professional advice when you should be seeing to yourself is a fundamental error of judgement, and one which will haunt you until such time as you acknowledge it for the colossal mistake that it is. This is not about persuading you to accept an argument by weight of evidence, or selling you the idea that it will somehow make you a better person: it is simply getting you to realise that you cannot possibly think for yourself if someone else is thinking

for you. And if you cannot think for yourself, you cannot know anything for yourself, and if you cannot know anything for yourself, you will never be in a position to see where your own special and unique opportunity for ultimate fulfilment lies, you will only be in a position to see what someone else's idea of what your fulfilment might be. In a word, you need to be able to see what you can see, for yourself.

Psychotherapy is, at its most elemental, guided by an utterly trivial concept of therapeutic effectiveness[5], and would have us submit to various speculative dogmas, surrendering in the process both autonomy and self-reliance, supposedly in the cause of a quasi-medical concern for our wellbeing. And while it is undeniably true that that there are vast areas of our own experiencing that we ourselves can't fathom - let alone control - it is a serious misjudgement to conclude from this that this means other people – the accredited professionals - are in a better position to understand us than we are ourselves. To accept the idea that they are – even inadvertently, or with the best of intentions – is to cripple yourself at the very outset of any quest for ultimate self-fulfilment, with far reaching consequences. It testifies to an elemental failure to appreciate the necessity for self-reliance - as part of a requirement for direct knowledge - and it condemns the subject to a mediated understanding of themselves. Even if the mediated knowledge were both wholly benign and wholly accurate – most unlikely - it would still not constitute direct knowledge, in a situation in which direct knowledge is specifically being sought. This renders any form of mediated psychological selfknowledge both counterproductive and self-defeating. The buddhistic commitment is to seek direct insight wherever meaningfully possible, and to avoid any sort of doctrinal mediation, even in the benevolent guise of theories specifically designed to

enhance our wellbeing.

Where does this leave someone wanting to begin to try to understand their own psyche for themselves ? Unavoidably bewildered, most likely. When you try to think your way around your own mind, and at that very moment seem to have lost your way, it seems so appropriate to want to consult a professional, and have them offer you expert guidance. It's so much more reassuring than having to negotiate the darkness for yourself. Working things out for yourself is seldom comforting, or encouraging. At least, not to begin with. It always seems to leave you feeling bereft, and alone. Partly this is to do with the inevitable anxiety that you may be missing something by setting yourself apart from the flock. This is why people will gladly pay someone to tell them what to do, even if the advice is unwittingly misguided and uninformed, as it almost always is. It takes years to get to know a person, to a stage where you could begin to tailor meaningful advice to them personally, and it would take even longer if your only exposure to them was in a formal setting, such as a counselling consultation. This has nothing to do with psychoanalytic garbage about transference or whatever, it is a simple truth about exposure to the facts about how a person actually lives their life in concrete situations, and the simple truth that no counsellor is going to be able to witness these facts for themselves, short of moving in with the client. And even then, it would be a very foolish and inexperienced person who would conclude, after a year or two living with a client – an impossibility anyway - 'I know this person inside out'. Have you seen them react to grief ? To the ravages of time, or to the ravages of illness ? To the loss of lifetime friendships ? Or to the sudden acquisition of wealth, or success ? To any kind of life-changing event ?

The idea here is simply to expose the basic misjudgment about the feasibility of accurately and meaningfully uncovering a person's psychological experiencing as the result of the application of learned technique. Psychological insight can't be thought of as something you can teach, like boxing, or playing the violin, or speaking Chinese. Even more to the point, the extent to which a person's psychology can easily be apprehended is in inverse proportion to their complexity of character, so the more there is to them in terms of depth of personality, the harder it will be to gain any kind of grasp of what really motivates them, and sustains them inwardly. This is not a difficult concept, flying in the face of all the evidence. It has to be one of the most painfully obvious facts of life, available to anyone anywhere, whatever their intellectual capacity; yet somehow psychotherapy does not consider it worth taking seriously. This is because psychology and psychotherapy believes it can overcome any deficit in understanding by the application of technique, so that any modestly intelligent 25 year old can, with a certificate or two, and a dab of midnight oil, analyse someone with a lifetime of experience, and confidently set them on the right path. It doesn't take much reflection to see how ridiculous this is.

Does this mean the end of all forms of psychotherapeutic counselling ? For adults – meaning autonomous individuals with a measure of age and experience – it should certainly mean the end of partisan counselling of the sort which, believing it has cracked the code for human psychology, attempts to implement a solution by means of specific techniques. This is not because of the theoretical impossibility of there being a psychological theory so insightful and sophisticated that it effectively exposes human psychology in all its richness and depth, but because

this is not the way to approach your own psychological capacities, or even to help other people understand themselves. If you want to understand yourself, you have to learn to observe your own experiencing, not consult a book which explains it all to you, no matter how accurate that explanation. You have to come to your own conclusions, however difficult and time-consuming it may be to reach them: anything less than this is insight by proxy, which is equivalent to no insight at all.

We need to draw the threads together here. It might appear that the conclusion is that psychotherapy in any shape or form is mistaken, and that the whole enterprise, starting with psychology itself, ought to be abandoned. This is not what we are trying to say. What is being said here is that psychology and psychotherapy have to be abandoned if and when you are serious about the quest for self-knowledge, and self enquiry, and the innermost truth about yourself. If and when you are serious about striving for metaphysical gnosis – for knowing your place in the universe, and how the universe works. This type of knowledge cannot be gained through doctrine, or through filtering your experiences through the ideas of others: it can only be gained first hand, directly, and without intermediary.

But this is not to say that many ordinary people – especially those who are only concerned to enjoy life - cannot be greatly helped by psychology and its sister science psychotherapy. Of course they can. There is nothing to dispute here; this is a matter of common sense. Psychotherapeutic intervention can be the difference between life and death, between sanity and madness, between meaning and meaninglessness. But success on this scale can only happen if the client is, for whatever reason,

deeply trusting of whatever it is they are told, to the extent that they would 'feel better' about their situation even if their experience of distress were to increase ! People who are willing to submit to psychotherapeutic authority can be found in all walks of life, and their capacity to do so is not a function of their education, sophistication or maturity. Likewise the phenomenon of a patient feeling better whatever the therapeutic intervention – and perhaps in spite of it - is well known to the medical profession. So we are effectively talking about psychotherapeutic value as a function of a kind of innocent faith in the system – combined with commonsensical therapeutic practices such as having someone sympathetic to talk to – where the client is taken care of by forces they perceive to be superior and more knowledgeable than themselves. There is obviously more to it than this, but it is the passive and credulous approach of the client which is key to success in the whole process. Clients hand themselves over to the system, hope for the best, and respond positively to whatever they are told. It is essentially a deferential submission to authority, and it most certainly can work.

Trying to make a start, on your own

So where do you start, if you want to understand your own 'psyche', your own psychological experiencing ? Not by supplying yourself with explanatory material, which is what psychology amounts to, but by learning to question what you see, at two levels at the same time: at one level, by asking yourself, in the most elemental way, what you think causes what, when it comes to various psychological states that you experience; and at another level, by asking yourself whether 'causality' is the most appropriate category to employ, or not to employ, when trying to explain your psychological

functioning to yourself. And if not, what would be ? Can we explain our psychological reactions to things without employing the concept of causality, or something like it ? Are we not just clutching at readymade explanations supplied by other people ? And why do we feel reassured by applying some explanatory label to a situation, when the label does not advance our understanding in any way ? And so on. By establishing these two tiers of questioning, one directed at specifics, and the other at your methods of thought, you effectively undermine any psychological dogmas and doctrines you may be secretly holding on to, and in so doing neutralise them, and pave the way for authentic clarity of thought. It shouldn't be too long before you can stand on your own two feet, and be able to see the ridiculous vacuity of most psychological pronouncements made from on high, and be able to work things out for yourself.

The transformative power of independent, self-reliant thought

Self-reliant thought has tremendous transformative power – in terms of clarity and lucidity of thought, and simply getting a basic grip on life - but it takes a while before the results start to show. This is because of the sense of isolation - and directionlessness - that invariably accompanies any attempt at working things out for yourself. You face multiple tasks, in that you find yourself having not only to think through what you find, but also having to work out where to look, and even *how* to look. To begin with, you find it impossible not to rely on stuff you have read, and stuff you have been told. Concepts like 'the unconscious' or 'transference' or 'Oedipal complex' seem to explain things to you in a way that your own ideas never will be able to, and

you cannot imagine a day when you might be able to witness your experiencing without recourse to them. But if you examine these concepts slowly and persistently, all the time asking yourself how they can be justified, and which bits of your experience supposedly justify them, you can, in time, begin to see whether or not they are merely bits of narrative fantasy, or real elements which stand up to objective scrutiny. And if they are real elements, are they fixed, or fluid, or neither ? How does the whole idea of 'psychological explanation' – whether Freudian, or behaviourist, or whatever - hang together, and make sense ? Or is it some kind of convenient delusion, a kind of mass psychosis we are all a willing party to ?

But if you can find the strength of will and purpose to persist with such questioning, chipping away at the granite edifice of your worldly indoctrination, you will surely come to see some things for yourself. Even if the only thing you manage to see is that you cannot break free of other people's explanations of things, and that you will never be able to come up with your own. That would be enough of a start, and a useful first step, on which you might be able to build.

A very basic but useful exercise at a very early stage on the road to developing self-reliant thought is simply to learn to drill through – until you reach a dead end - the hidden content behind the various news items you come across in media. The surface content is easy enough, in that you are being informed of something considered interesting and newsworthy, but beyond that, what is the news item trying to tell you about life ? Why is it interesting and newsworthy ? This might seem an impossibly open-ended task, but it is not: the broad categories into which news items can be classified are surprisingly few, and these classifications can be made

without trivialising or seriously distorting the actual content of the item itself. For example, most news items are about threats to life of one sort or another; the rest are about ways in which life can be enhanced, or extended. News hardly consists of anything other than these two topics, and this surely tells us something about the elements of life just below the surface: avoid pain, seek pleasure, keep going.

If you can learn to think your way beneath the surface excitement of life, not following any doctrine of any kind, but simply trying to get to the point of things, as best you can, you will surely, sooner or later, begin to gain insight into the metaphysical structure of the experiencing capacity in which you are already situated. And if there is a possibility, through the insights you have gained, of finding a way to fulfil yourself in some kind of ultimate and decisive way, then you will be able to explore it. And other soteriological doctrines – religious and secular – which you will already have encountered along the way, will start to look, in the light of your own direct, unmediated explorations, very hollow indeed. This is the whole purpose behind rejecting the beguiling theories inherent in psychology and psychotherapy – as well as any other doctrines which mediate your experiencing - and learning to think for yourself.

Conclusion

While the science of psychology and the practice of psychotherapy may have much to offer those whose only goal in life is worldly happiness, they have almost nothing to offer, either directly or indirectly, those who seek ultimate self-fulfilment. And more importantly, there is no middle ground here, no possibility of merging psychology and psychotherapy with a quest for ultimate self-fulfilment, because worldly scientific advancement and metaphysical self-understanding

are pursuing qualitatively different objectives.

Metaphysical self-knowledge is predicated on the ability to think and observe for oneself, and a good place to start is by observing one's own psychological experiencing.

Summary

(1) Psychology and psychotherapy are sciences – disciplines - supposedly aimed at supplying us with objective knowledge about our inner mental capacities, as well as how to achieve and maintain everyday wellbeing.

(2) But insofar as they present us with fully developed theories of mental functioning, and prescriptions for wellbeing, they prevent us from a basic and direct examination of our own experiencing, and what that experiencing might inform us about ourselves.

(3) If we are to achieve direct knowledge of ourselves, we will have to abandon mediated accounts - such as are presented to us by psychology and psychotherapy - of what we supposedly are, and how we supposedly think, and learn to think and observe for ourselves.

(4) We can ground ourselves in a basic context comprising of adequacy, sanity and normality.

(5) And what we will discover, if we ground ourselves in this wholly elemental context, and begin to explore our own experiencing, will be startlingly different from what is commonly believed to be the case; and it will also serve to increase our self-reliance, and capacity for independence of thought and judgement.

(6) Metaphysical gnosis – and the path to ultimate self-fulfilment - can only be achieved under conditions of direct perception, observation and reflection. This is the buddhistic way, and it runs counter to doctrinal authoritarianism of any and every sort, especially as might be encountered in religion, and in secular systems such as psychology and psychotherapy.

Endnotes

[1] Further essays can be found at https://theindependentbuddhist.website

[2] Online magazines such as Slate, Salon & Huffington Post regularly publish articles consisting of portentous psychological explanations; typical example: 'Psychology helps explain why Louis C.K. is so funny' 'Research suggests we really do find humor in tragedy, but only during a specific, limited window of time.' http://www.salon.com/2013/12/18/psychology_helps_explains_why_louis_c_k_is_so_funny_partner/

[3] Malcolm Gladwell – though not strictly a psychologist – is the current master of specious arguments supposedly validated by experimental data.

[4] Anal Character: one fixed at the anal level of *psychosexual development*, when the *libido* charges the anus with energy. People stuck at this early stage are regarded as parsimonious, obstinate, hoarding, and perfectionistic. http://www.terrapsych.com/freud.html

[5] Psychotherapy is all about solving life problems. For example: 'Generally psychotherapy is recommended whenever a person is grappling with a life, relationship or work issue or a specific mental health concern, and these issues are causing the individual a great deal of pain or upset for longer than a few days…Most psychotherapy tends to focus on problem solving and is goal-oriented. That means at

the onset of treatment, you and your therapist decide upon which specific changes you would like to make in your life. Psychotherapy is most successful when the individual enters therapy on their own and has a strong desire to change… Change means altering those aspects of your life that aren't working for you any longer, or are contributing to your problems or ongoing issues.' From http://psychcentral.com/psychotherapy/

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[a representative sample only; many dozens of other books used in the preparation of this essay]

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6

The Perpetual Emptiness of Academic Philosophy, and its strange inability to address the one issue that matters

The purpose of this short study is to give some help to those hoping to gain an insight into the metaphysical realms of their being, and who would like some guidance with regard to those formal and academic disciplines supposedly geared to dealing with that very subject. If you are genuinely motivated by a sense of confusion and hopelessness when it comes to matters of your ultimate destiny and fulfilment, then you will surely feel greatly intimidated by the vast collection

of material that already exists in fields such as philosophy, metaphysics, theology and science; and you will likely approach these disciplines with an overwhelming sense of trepidation and inadequacy. Humility and a willingness to learn is one thing, but the mistaken belief that these disciplines have already cracked the code for the human condition is another. The problem is that these disciplines actively court self-serving obfuscation and bluster, pretending to know much more than they actually do. It can be greatly heartening to know this, and to be able to see the reach of intellectual subterfuge for yourself. So at least part of this study is an exercise in demystification.

Introduction

If you turn to philosophy in the hope of finding answers to the 'big questions' of life and existence – questions about the meaning and purpose of life, and about your ultimate destiny – you will be sorely disappointed. Philosophy has nothing to offer on these topics, and never has done. You would think that, given the fact that our ultimate fulfilment is the most important, the most crucial, the most immediate issue facing all of us, that philosophy – supposedly a discipline that has some remote connection to the idea of the 'love of wisdom' – would concentrate all its efforts on the subject and have no time for anything else, yet this is not even distantly the case. You won't find a single philosophical book on the question of ultimate human fulfilment anywhere, either in a bookshop, or in the dusty stacks of some library reserve collection. Even after thousands of years of philosophical musings, stretching back to the Pre-Socratics, we still do not have a single convincing philosophical account of the human

condition, nor anything approaching one. Nor do we have a single 'big name' in the entire history of philosophy – not a single one ! – who could be termed a specialist in the subject, and to whom one could turn, if not for guidance, at least for a few useful ideas. And this is, if you think about it, a most astonishing situation. When it comes to the topics that really matter, scholarly philosophy is a complete disaster.

Of course criticising philosophy is not new, and in fact is as old as the idea of philosophy itself. But it tends to come from people who disparage any sort of reflective thinking on life, and who think that the solution to everything is simply to 'get on with it'. This is not the line being pursued here; we are arguing that philosophy doesn't do enough reflective thinking, and that the right kind of reflective thinking is of the utmost value and importance, and that we should all be doing a lot more of it, not that it is a waste of time.

How to negotiate this mess ? We might start by looking for some kind of simple causal explanation, in the hope that it will at the same time deliver a simple solution, yet strange as it may seem, having some sort of handle on this aspect of the problem is not really that important in the long run. It doesn't much matter whether it's that people are just not that much interested in what ultimately becomes of them, or that professional philosophers are stupid and bad at their job. Far more pressing is the question as to what can be done about it, and here we run straight into the sand. Obviously the simple answer is: get on with the task of direct exploration of the human condition and the human predicament, and put other considerations aside. There is no doubt that this is the definitive answer, and the most immediate solution. But there are sure to be some who would like to know if a genuine metaphysics can be integrated with something like the

discipline of academic philosophy as it now stands, and how these two would relate to one another. And in order to do this we need to show how philosophy could be greatly improved if its principles were clarified, and how the quite distinct and separate discipline of metaphysics could be transformed from misguided speculation into something essential and valuable, by giving it direction. In the case of philosophy, the clarification of principles involves redefining philosophy such that it becomes strictly confined to the principles and practice of critical thinking, thereby consigning any and all speculative content to quite separate disciplines such as epistemology, cosmology, metaphysics, ontology, aesthetics and so on; and with regard to metaphysics, cogency is achieved by directing it exclusively towards ultimate human fulfilment, and consigning all other issues and speculations to the dustbin.

So we would end up with philosophy as the technique of critical thinking, and metaphysics as the science of ultimate human fulfilment. This may not seem like much of an achievement, given that we are still at the level of redefining and repositioning, and we might be accused of merely playing with words: what difference could it possibly make to the quality of any outcome to consign philosophy's speculative capacity to separate disciplines ? Drivel will remain drivel, even after repackaging. And isn't 'ultimate fulfilment' just another label for some kind of conclusion ? And if metaphysics still hasn't yet managed to engage with the topic of some kind of conclusive soteriological accomplishment, what difference is a new label going to make ?

The value of these redefinitions lies in their ability to clarify, and focus attention; and clarity is at a premium in a topic as occluded as the metaphysics of the human predicament. Learning to observe, and witness, and ponder is

relatively easy, but often one's observations and conclusions are violently disfigured and falsified by the other thoughts that one has swirling about in one's mind, and many of these other thoughts are based on one's expectations and judgements arising out of what one has been taught, and conditioned to believe. If you live in an intellectual world where the only alternatives are scientific materialism and religious belief, it takes an enormously powerful independence and maturity of mind to be able to clarify various ideas for oneself, and then to come to vaguely the right conclusions.

The Human Metaphysical Predicament

To elucidate the value of a relationship between a clearly defined philosophy, and a very simple and straightforward metaphysics of fulfilment, we need to have a clear idea of what it is we are talking about when discussing the mystery at the centre of the human condition. This mystery, and our inability to resolve it, is the essence of the human predicament. The first task of metaphysics is to elucidate this mystery as best we can - not with the intention of wallowing in its capacity to confound us, but in order to try to find a way to resolve it, thereby fulfilling ourselves as human beings.

The basic human metaphysical predicament can be portrayed in very stark and easily graspable terms. We can begin by characterising its emergence in a phase of adolescence –usually in the mid to late teens – when the whole experience of life starts to take on a perplexing quality, and seems to become mysterious to itself. There are hints of this

state even in childhood, but it does not reveal itself fully until at least the mid-teens. Existence becomes strangely unfathomable, and elusive, as well as oddly unsatisfying, even when life seems to be going well. Familiar experiences take on an absurdist quality, and nothing seems to have any fixed value, or any true meaning. We find ourselves provoked into questioning the very purpose of existence, and we start to wonder if anything really makes any sense at all. Our entire existence seems to yearn for some kind of cosmic explanation, as well as some kind of final resolution. Yet no matter how hard we look for it, this final resolution is nowhere to be found – and it is certainly not lurking somewhere in our everyday consciousness - and so one is left vaguely defeated, and condemned to a state of unfulfilled emptiness. This is how we encounter life as a 'peculiar predicament', and this encounter is experienced by everyone – to varying degrees and at varying times - as is the sense of being in a kind of half-expectant limbo; though most people manage these feelings by supressing them, or by distracting themselves with other concerns. And although our experience of existence as a predicament never disappears altogether, its power to interfere with our general sense of well-being seems to diminish as one gets older, and so we can come to think of our strange cosmic dissatisfaction as having more to do with adolescent uncertainty and immaturity than with an opportunity for any kind of metaphysical gnosis. We just get on with living, and we tell ourselves that our accomplishments in life will put paid to any ongoing sense of emptiness.

That's the way most people deal with their existential uncertainty. They find a way to close their minds to the peculiar darkness and ignorance at the centre of their being. But there are a select few who find that the desire to resolve this mystery takes a firm hold of them, and persists way

beyond adolescence, and then condemns them to a very conflicted existence. On the one hand they might feel inclined towards religion, and inclined to embrace faith, belief and prescribed practice; and on the other there is an inclination towards a more distantiated, independent, reflective approach, with reading, discussing, learning, and trying - by intellectual means - to work things out for yourself. Religion demands that you plunge in; reflective thought demands that you stand back. These are not options that one could come to a conclusive decision about over the course of a mere few months; it takes years, and certainly involves many changes of mind, many wrong decisions and many blunders into the unknown, all the time hoping for the best, and with only a trust in fate to hold on to.

Studying philosophy as an option in a quest for metaphysical knowledge

So let us suppose you find yourself deeply provoked by the big questions of life and existence, and would like to make some serious efforts towards finding answers to them. You've read some books, and had long discussions with various friends. You know about religion, and you know about science, but neither of these two avenues offer you the kind of objectivity you think is essential to your quest because, having an inquiring, analytical mind, you suspect that they skew the outlook in their favour right from the start. You also know a bit about psychology, and you feel that there may be profound human truths in there somewhere, but the day to day concerns of psychologists seem a long way from any kind of direct engagement with the deeper truths of life.

Which leaves philosophy. It is almost impossible for an outsider to imagine what philosophy would be like prior to their actually studying it in a formal setting. You will be sure to approach it with all kinds of imaginings, most of which are seriously mistaken. You might think that you will soon be discussing all possible major topics of life and existence, and analysing them in great detail - and the reading list you have been given seems to back this up - but the reality is always very different, and always massively disappointing. You will find yourself having to study the history of philosophy – which is unconscionably dull - and, more importantly, having to learn how to constrain your philosophical musings in line with very strict rules of engagement, none of which encourages the kind of penetrating questioning which gets to the heart of life and existence. You can't help but feel yourself being brutally brought down to earth, and intellectually refashioned, supposedly in the name of scholarly precision, intellectual substantiality, and academic rectitude; and all these in turn in the service of real thought, and the highest standards of academic judgement.

Not knowing any better, the hapless supplicant has no choice but to trust philosophical authority. You well understand that it is right for you to have to learn how to break your ideas down into their conceptual components, and then to subject these components to the most stringent rational and intellectual analysis. You expected something like this, but the actuality is far more radical and destructive than you could have imagined. Philosophy becomes quite other that what you thought it was going to be, but who are you, as an ill-informed outsider, to question so august a system ? Worse still, if someone asked you what exactly what your complaint with the system was, you wouldn't know what to say. So you defer judgement on the whole process because,

after all, you are at a reputable institution studying for a reputable degree validated by the academic community, so any misgivings you might have start to look increasingly unwarranted and unjustified.

And this is how it goes. And by the time you come to your senses – if you ever do – it will be too late. You will have had the stuffing knocked out of you by the system, and you will not be in any position to mount some form of rear-guard action. You will long since have abandoned questions like 'What is the meaning of life ?' in favour of convoluted absurdities like 'Can a use of the first-person concept fail to refer ?[1]', and you will actually come to believe that you now think more clearly than you did before you started. You will snort derisively at any non-professional using the term 'metaphysics', as they are guaranteed to be using the term in a 'non-standard' way, and are sure to have no idea what they are talking about.

This is one key way in which the system of scholarly philosophy destroys the capacity to ask perfectly valid and straightforward questions of an existential nature. It is because the most profound and searching questions any human being can ask – questions about their ultimate fulfilment – are simply too deep for the trivial minds that populate the world of professional philosophy. Philosophers would argue that the so-called 'big questions' of life and existence are really non-questions, and need to be rephrased – in other words, redirected, diluted, and emptied of content - in terms more amenable to standard philosophical discourse, so that they can be dismissed as misjudgements.

Philosophy in the popular imagination, & the need to demystify it

There is another important dimension to the position of philosophy as a gateway to metaphysics, and this concerns the idea of philosophy as it exists in the popular imagination. Despite the fact that the popular understanding of philosophy is very different from those better informed, the popular view of philosophy remains noticeably compelling, and influential. This is because outsiders like to imbue philosophy with a whiff of mysticism, conferring on philosophers a hint of esoteric charisma, as if their studies definitely involved some sort of initiation into advanced and sophisticated modes of thought, and possibly into hidden truths. The fact that the reality of philosophy is the very opposite of this hardly matters, because the illusion is its own reward, and this is what even educated people feel inclined to believe; and philosophers themselves make no effort to disabuse them of this view. Philosophers like the idea that ordinary people think that philosophers know something ordinary people don't.

This conflation of philosophy with esoteric insight is not the harmless bit of fluff it might seem. It is an everyday fantasy that has been surprisingly pernicious. It has contributed - in its own insidious way - to a persistent lack of clarity as regards the principles underpinning philosophy, beginning with the crucial distinction between the techniques and procedures of critical thinking on the one hand, and all forms of theoretical construct on the other. Philosophy needs to limit itself to the former, and disassociate itself from the latter. If this distinction is not made very clear, and is not well understood from the very outset, a situation arises where

philosophers feel emboldened to pontificate authoritatively on any subject that takes their fancy, in the exalted belief that their ideas flow directly from something called 'philosophy', which consists of a vast repository[2] of 'rigorous formulations' and 'subtle logical analyses'[3] and into which the elect can plunge any time they feel the need. This would of itself guarantee that any pronouncements made by an accredited philosopher are of a very high order, and possibly well out of reach of the average mortal. The problem is that no such repository of high order philosophical knowledge exists, and what is being passed off as philosophical insight is mere opinion, and most of it, when stripped of its grandiose esoteric trappings, is dishearteningly trivial.

Basic methodological principle: academic philosophy is the art and science of critical thinking[4], and nothing besides

Philosophy should not be thought of as possessing any substantial theoretical content of its own. It is a method, a skillset, a series of techniques, not a repository of various highbrow theories, whether about mind, epistemology, ontology, cosmology, science, or anything else. It is a methodological preparation for any and all manner of intellectual exploration, but it remains distinct from the content of such undertakings. The theoretic underpinnings of various distinct disciplines, such as history, or science, or aesthetics, should not be thought of as 'the philosophy' of these disciplines but should be designated by other specialist titles, so as not to perpetuate the idea that there is some kind of knowledge base called 'philosophy', which somehow lends

itself to various disciplines to help construct and inform their theoretical principles. Philosophy should only be thought of as contributing intellectual rigor to a discipline, and not theoretical or conceptual content.

So it would therefore advance the cause of genuine metaphysical enquiry greatly if everyone understood where philosophy ends and metaphysics begins, and that the two are not interdependent. This can only happen if a very clear distinction between philosophy as critical methodology, and all forms of theoretical construct, is understood from the outset, and strictly adhered to.

And we need to remind ourselves that the point here is not simply to clarify the principles of philosophy; the point is to clear the way for a genuine metaphysics. Genuine metaphysical enquiry is greatly facilitated if everyone understands that metaphysics is not some form of conceptual outgrowth, parasitically dependent for its every feature – and for its very existence - on a body of knowledge called 'philosophy', which itself has evolved out of the countless hours of philosophical chatter in seminar rooms all over the world, combined with the steady stream of philosophical writings throughout history. The simple fact is, there is no such body of knowledge called 'philosophy', consisting of a repository of useful concepts, distinctions and procedures, nor is there anything approximating to it; there is only critical thinking, and then the range of subjects - from epistemology, to ontology, to science, to aesthetics - to which such critical thinking can be applied.

'Philosophy of Life'

We should point out, however, as a proviso to the very restricted view of academic philosophy defined above, that there is a widespread and popular use of the term 'philosophy' which, though perfectly instructive and legitimate, unfortunately contributes to the very mystification of the metaphilosophical principles we have just tried to clarify. And this is the use of the term 'philosophy' in the phrase 'philosophy of life', meaning a considered approach to life, incorporating one's values and strategies for achieving one's goals. It wouldn't be justified to attempt to prevent 'philosophy' from being used in this way, because part of the enjoyment to be had from non-scholarly, worldly 'philosophising' – in an armchair, or in the pub - comes from the hint of mystical magic accompanying the idea of striving towards wisdom. But where this mystical magic leaks out of its worldly context and begins to infect the scholarly idea of philosophy, the trouble begins.

Metaphysics as a separate and quite distinct enterprise from philosophy

How do we define 'metaphysics' ? Metaphysics is a formal discipline designed to give intellectual coherence to our thoughts relating to our capacity to explore the features of our metaphysical condition. As human beings, we have a physical capacity, a psychological capacity, an intellectual capacity; and a metaphysical capacity which transcends the other capacities in its ability to witness, reflect and explore every aspect of these other capacities without itself being

incorporated into them. The intellectual formalisation of explorations and reflections within our metaphysical capacity would properly be the content of metaphysics as a discipline. And the discipline of metaphysics would include material both academic and non-academic, in that the value of metaphysical explorations – from whatever source – ought to be judged in terms of their accuracy, rather than their scholarly virtue.

And of course metaphysics as a discipline is not an open-ended opportunity for endless speculation, because it derives its meaning and purpose from the desire we have to fulfil ourselves by resolving the mystery at the core of our existence; insofar as we understand - or hope, or believe - that resolving this mystery will result in our ultimate fulfilment. Perhaps it won't, but then we will continue our quest for fulfilment from within the new situation in which we find ourselves. It makes no sense for us to say that we are not interested in our ultimate fulfilment – however we conceive of it – because what else could possibly take its place ? Even the desire to be unfulfilled would, paradoxically, have to stand in as a kind of desired fulfilment.

Now how could the distinction between philosophy as methodological skillset, and the theoretical content which it should be applied to, possibly help advance our understanding of the human metaphysical predicament ? First of all by making it clear that academic philosophy is about learning how to think, and not about being taught some fashionable philosopher's half-baked idea of how things are. Philosophy should not be about the acquiring of wisdom, but about acquiring the tools necessary for clarity of thought, and the ability to analyse ideas. Anyone can learn the principles of logical thinking and rational expression, and this does not make them either worldly wise or metaphysically realised. To

achieve either wisdom or gnosis they will need to take their philosophical skills and apply them to specific realms of experience; and if they then want to pronounce on these topics they do so as 'sages', 'metaphysicians', or 'logicians', and not as 'philosophers'. This might seem a very insignificant move in the great cause of clarifying different categories of knowledge, but it is not: philosophers like to pretend to themselves they operate in a domain of advanced and sophisticated thinking, and are using high-powered cleverness to apprehend things the rest of us are only dimly and mistakenly aware of, whereas in fact most ordinary philosophers are basically confused metaphysicians, struggling to make the case for superficial conceptions of life and experience that, if shown for what they were, would be derided as simple-minded and absurd. These often very naïve and shallow conceptions of reality are hidden under layers of subterfuge – the more elusive and definitionally complicated the better – and then defended with a mixture of superciliousness and bombast. Any apparent self-confidence is entirely a defensive posture, and the verbal dexterity and the slippery distinctions conceal a genuine sense of inadequacy and a fear of ridicule. It is often said that philosophers hate being asked by ordinary people to explain what it is that philosophers do[5], and this embarrassment is a confirmation of the fact that, despite the supposed grandiloquence of their status, your average philosopher knows that they are going to sound very foolish when trying to justify what appear to be a self-serving series of complex distinctions and definitions based on a very naïve conception of what life is all about. The humiliation could be done away with if the honest and accurate answer was 'I teach critical thinking' - no more, no less. If the conversation then strays into a wider conception of what life is all about, in the pursuit of speculative worldly wisdom, the philosopher-technician

ought to make it clear that they are straying into the realms of personal opinion, and that their real field of expertise is of an altogether more pragmatic nature.

So if academic philosophers understood themselves to be technicians in the first instance – albeit of a highly specialised and valuable order - and that their discipline was solely a matter of mastering intellectual and critical technique, and that their pedagogical role was only to impart the principles of critical thinking to others, most – if not all – of the absurdity and mystical confusion surrounding philosophy would disappear. Students would study philosophy to be taught critical techniques, not be initiated – surreptitiously - into doctrines of metaphysics, science and religion. Metaphysics, theology and worldly wisdom should be kept entirely separate from the notion of philosophy though, of course, the critical skills of philosophy – understood as the discipline which specialises in perfecting critical skills – would be of inestimable value in any exploration of metaphysics, or theology, or politics, or history, or of any subject whatsoever amenable to an intellectual approach.

The question of human fulfilment

To anchor this whole discussion we need to further elucidate to the idea of fulfilment. 'Fulfilment' is the kind of term which might be bandied about in many contexts, starting with psychology, and then extending to include all kinds of New Agery, but properly understood it retains an elemental cogency which far transcends all of the soteriological markers which are usually employed to indicate some form of meaningful terminus or conclusion to human striving.

For example, the most crucial and significant question I can ask of my existence, and one that cannot meaningfully be transcended by any other, is 'how do I achieve my ultimate fulfilment ?' This would not be to obsess on the ergonomics of the 'how'; it would be to direct myself to this possibility, and to strive towards its achievement. It wouldn't make sense for me to say that I was not interested in my ultimate fulfilment, or that I could conceive of something more important than that, given that the whole notion of importance would surely revolve around some kind of critical relevance to an ultimate 'me' situated in an ultimate 'condition' for me. This is not trivial, or tautologous: ultimate states and conditions which may apply to me, yet which do not supply the elements which would leave me ultimately satisfied, are clearly not going to constitute my ultimate fulfilment. We can play with ideas here, and introduce paradoxical logic, quantum physics and all the rest of it, but the validity of the basic formulation - grounded in a certain simplicity of ordinary thought – remains: it is not possible, or meaningful, for me to direct myself at anything other than my ultimate fulfilment, even if I am uncertain as to every element in my conception thereof, and remain so indefinitely.

In a very direct way, of course, our lives are all about – and only about - our attempts at striving for ultimate fulfilment, even in those conditions where we settle for less, because we do so in a state of expectation, and readiness for something better; even if, once again, we are less than decisive in our engagements with opportunities. Life is basically a 'heading towards something' (usually only death !) - a transitional process, and insofar as any one of us is self-concerned, or in some way interested in their own destiny, it is meaningful – and accurate - to characterise this transitional process as directed at self-fulfilment. We may not achieve it,

but we cannot abandon it.

This somewhat loose conceptual study of fulfilment includes within it the possibility that I might seriously have misapprehended and misunderstood every aspect of my being and my selfhood - and even that no such thing as 'ultimate fulfilment' exists - but until I am better appraised of the situation, it is meaningful for me to try to seek fulfilment of this sort. Of course there is a certain circularity in this type of argument, but its validity is not diminished thereby.

All other forms of profound questioning derive their value from their proximity to the issue of one's ultimate fulfilment. Whether or not there is a God, or whether or not scientific determinism and evolution are the last word on everything - and any and all questions of a similar nature - are only issues of relevance and value to me if their resolution – one way or another - contributes to my ultimate fulfilment; if some essential part of me is left out of the equation, then it makes no sense for me to consider them crucial.

For example, some thinkers consider the question 'why is there something rather than nothing ?' to be of profound importance in any ongoing quest for ultimate knowledge. Well, it's clearly not a trivial question, yet even if it were somehow 'answered' – people like Hawking think they can do it with their scientific explanations - what has it got to do with me ? In other words, where do I fit into the grand answer, the grand equation ? Where does the essential component of 'my being' get itself, not merely incorporated into, but crucially fulfilled by the answer ? Who's to care why the universe is something out of nothing, if I am left out of it ? The same line of reasoning can be applied to the idea of a 'God' or to the idea of any particular state of affairs: when all is said

and done, there is only one single crucial element that needs to be attended to, and it is the elusive, unconstrained 'me' of 'myself'.

There are two main counters to this, but both are superficial. The first would be to identify any talk of a 'me' with the idea of a rampant egotism of the most selfish and infantile kind, and then to denigrate this infantile egotism in the name of some sort of higher, usually quasi-religious, 'selfless' conception of self, and selfless conception of universal purpose. But there can be infinitely more sophisticated conceptions of the innermost 'me' which have little or nothing to do with that kind of grossly selfish egotism, while yet remaining compellingly important as features of my ordinary experience. The 'me' of my ordinary thoughts is almost always embarrassingly sentimental and infantile, but that is not the element of my experience which I would seek to fulfil in some greater sense: it would be a much loftier, extensive, all-encompassing and intimate conception of myself which escapes capture in ordinary thought and thinking, yet which is impossible for me to ignore, or disregard. Any conception of the cosmos, or ultimate state of affairs which does not address the fact of this 'innermost, uppermost, ultimate me' is obviously of no real interest to me. How could it be ? This is not the same as solipsism, as we are all in the same position, and all subject to the same sense of innermost, uppermost self, whether we are prepared to acknowledge it or not.

The second objection, a variation on the first, is grounded in materialist dogma. It is predisposed to disregard any 'soft' features of experience in the name of hard science, and it relies on reductionist logic to deny – and thereby explain away – the existence of what it would consider to be anomalies and inconsistencies. In this model, soft features

such as a 'sense of self' are identified with physical properties, reduced thereby, and then disregarded. The cosmos is conceived of as playing itself out in the complete absence of self-agencies – or at least, in the absence of any metaphysical reality of innermost selves – and so the issue of human fulfilment, in the grand scheme of things, simply does not arise. According to this scheme, we are all supposed to consider any and all features of our experience which we ourselves would value as important or crucial as of no consequence, either in the short or the long term. This kind of dehumanised conception appears to be very attractive to certain types of people, but perhaps they genuinely don't possess an innermost sense of self which they feel motivated to respond to.

This discussion is concerned with ultimate human fulfilment, and has investigated the extent to which philosophy could contribute to the process. Part of the problem with philosophy is that its self-image is grandiose, and supposedly of a piece with wisdom and advanced insight, but when it comes down to it, was passes as philosophical thought is invariably misguided and trivial.

Textual examples

Wittgenstein's 'Philosophical Investigations' (1953) is the perfect instance of loose and aimless theorising cloaking itself in the mantle of 'philosophy' in order to imbue it with a sense of depth and substance it does not deserve. The text itself is a series of largely non-sequential and often cryptic epigrammatic paragraphs, with a certain emphasis on the topics of language and communication, but as likely as not

pronouncing on a host of other subjects, from epistemology to mathematics. It is somewhat more than a glorified notebook, but considerably less than a specific argument, or even a series of directed propositions; and the overall effect is to hint mysteriously at some wider, more encompassing realisation elsewhere – an altogether greater understanding, perhaps - which Wittgenstein is not yet quite ready to share.

If the strict definition of philosophy as critical thinking was imposed on Wittgenstein's musings, he might have been forced to choose a title more along the lines of 'Random Thoughts of a Theoretical Nature on Various Unimportant Topics' which, for obvious reasons, does not have exactly the mystical profundity of 'Philosophical Investigations'. Wittgenstein and his ilk wanted to be thought of as 'philosophers' – people engaged in the fathoming of the depths of deepest thought – rather than as mere tenured clever dicks specialising in unrecognised paradoxes and brain teasers; and it is precisely this type of mystical cachet ordinary philosophers want to enjoy, while somehow avoiding the embarrassment of having to explain to the rest of us what it is they do that warrants such lofty status, because, as we've already seen, nothing they do warrants it.

And as could be expected, there is nothing in the entirety of Wittgenstein's investigations that comes remotely near the subject of the human predicament, or the metaphysics of fulfilment. That should on its own be reason enough to condemn the book as a complete waste of time, yet it has become a canonical text in the world of academic philosophy, inspiring endless seminars and journal articles, and treated with a reverence that is as stunning as it is pathetic.

The fact is, philosophy - as it is currently understood and practiced - does not offer anyone the least opportunity to explore the metaphysics of the human condition. We can't even say that it has been forced to concede ground to religion and science, because it never held the ground in the first place, or even tried to. This allows a book like Hawking's 'The Grand Design: New Answers to the Ultimate Questions in Life' (2010) to be openly contemptuous of traditional philosophy, at the same time as replacing it with a pseudo-philosophical scientistic dogma every bit as misguided and inadequate as any you might find in the tradition itself. For example, Hawking makes it clear that '…philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge.'[6] and 'This book is rooted in the concept of scientific determinism, which implies that the answer …is that there are no miracles, or exceptions to the laws of nature.'[7] In other words, if you're looking for the last word on all things, then this is it.

According to this very pedestrian materialist doctrine, everything is ultimately physical, and this means the 'answer' to everything can be found in a scientific law. So something like 'fulfilment' presumably lies in getting that idea into our thick skulls. And even those mysterious and elusive things like subatomic particles - which they happily admit we cannot actually 'see'[8] - are physical, so the idea of metaphysics, like the idea of God, is basically mistaken, and imaginary, and devoid of scientific value. Much of the argumentation in the book is directed against ideas of divine intervention, giving the impression there aren't any other theories worth rebutting, so if you don't believe in God you have no alternative but to go with science. But more startlingly, given the peculiarly dehumanised, insensate and abstracted

undercurrent to the entire natural scientific ethos, one wonders what sort of creature is meant to take heart from the whole scientific project. Of course we all love gadgets, and modern medicine, but are we seriously meant just to surrender to the idea that existence is for nothing ? And succumb to it without even exploring – to the bitter end - some serious alternatives ? Perhaps the scientific ethos is really just preparing the way for the arrival of some kind of alien life force, devoid of essential human features; that would figure.

Hawking is part of a vanguard of scientific thinkers – Richard Dawkins, Laurence Krauss, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett are others – who are dealing with the 'big questions of life and existence' by invoking a kind of scientific mysticism – a devotional confidence in the whole project[9] – and having it underpin everything they say. Scientific mysticism operates in the same way as does philosophical, in that it invokes a certain powerful image - in this case the incontestable and very visible achievements of technology - to act as a contextual framework within which to pitch exceptionally primitive explanations of life and existence, such that if you doubt what you are being told, you are doubting the whole of our modern world. Which probably means you believe in God. The metaphysics of this thoroughly anti-metaphysical outlook is that everything is to be explained by the dead hand of scientific explanation, and that there is nowhere else to look, and nothing else to do but to succumb to it.

Perspective: what conceivable difference is any of this going to make ?

We cannot expect a seismic shift in what people are

interested in, so we are not suddenly going to go from a situation in which philosophy has nothing to say about the human predicament, to a newly redefined philosophy which suddenly gives rise to an explosion of dedicated and insightful metaphysicians. People will likely always be wary of genuine metaphysics – as opposed to the speculative flights of fancy you find in science, religion and academia - and find it more effort than it is worth. Not because it is intellectually demanding, but because it requires a certain rare non-attached dedication and persistence.

But the point is not to change the world, set a new fashion, or attract a massive following, but to make it easier, and clearer, for those few who are interested in getting to the core of the mystery of existence, to get some idea on how to get started on this quest, as well as where to get started, and not to be put off by the idiocy of those who speak in the name of grandiose sounding disciplines like philosophy or quantum physics, or evolutionary biology. These people are not delivering conclusive accounts of anything; they are merely presenting theoretical interpretations of a very narrow range of phenomena, and doing so within the confines of very restricting sets of beliefs. Exploring the metaphysical reality of the human condition does not require any complex theoretical preparation, or any profundity of insight and experience, it simply requires the capacity to look, and look again, and think about what you see, or what you don't see. On such simple foundations, genuine metaphysical insight can establish itself.

Concluding remarks:

Philosophy has always been thought of as the place to go for impartial wisdom on any subject that mattered. The reality is that philosophers have no idea what their skills are, or should be, or what they should use them for. They are simply addicted to the idea of complex definitions and distinctions, and a belief in the idea that tying your brain in knots with words is a significant achievement. And if scholarly philosophy could be detached from the idea of some kind of mystical connection to wisdom - and the cachet that goes with it - and redefine itself simply as a matter of acquiring the skills of critical thinking, then each of the theoretical disciplines that have until now sheltered under the wing of philosophy would have to argue their case on their own, be subject to independent critical examination, and be seen for what they are, which is not very much.

For metaphysics to avoid becoming open ended and ungrounded speculation, it needs to focus on the human predicament, and direct its efforts towards the ultimate fulfilment of the human condition. Clarification of the basic principles involved will greatly assist in this process, and the demystification of philosophy, and the establishment of an independent, fulfilment-orientated metaphysics would be a good start.

Summary:

1) A metaphysics of the human condition, that is to say, an elucidation of the human predicament and whatever steps are required to resolve and fulfil that predicament, is the ultimate knowledge for any

human being. Anything other than this is less than crucial.

2) Philosophy, as an intellectual resource, both academic and non-academic, is, when it comes to the question of ultimate human fulfilment, a total disaster and a complete waste of time, and always has been.

3) Why ? Because it has not yet even successfully managed to acknowledge the issue of the human metaphysical predicament, let alone made steps to elucidate it, let alone offered even the most paltry ideas as to how it might be resolved.

4) Why is this ? Who knows; perhaps humans really don't much care about their ultimate destiny, and their ultimate purpose, and are happy just to be absorbed in the richness of the moment.

5) What to do about it ? The sole purpose behind any and all of this is to contribute meaningfully to a simple, objective, comprehensible metaphysics of the human predicament – our basic engagement with life and experience - with a view to resolving that predicament, and hopefully achieving ultimate human fulfilment thereby. What could possibly be more important, more crucial, or more valuable for any human being ?

6) How to set about this ? First, to clarify our intellectual resources - and in this particular case - academic 'philosophy'. And as part of a drive towards a very basic, elementary, uncomplicated metaphysical clarity, it would be helpful to clear away the mystification surrounding the strangely popular and very numinous idea of 'philosophy' as some kind of repository of profound concepts, all relating to, and possibly emanating from, some kind of free floating

'wisdom'; this idea seems to have a strong hold on both academics and non-academics alike.

7) And this can be achieved by clarifying the principles and practice of academic philosophy: 'philosophy' should be strictly separated from all supposedly philosophical sub-disciplines – epistemology, ontology, ethics, metaphysics etc – and made solely the 'art and science of critical thinking'. All other disciplines that previously sheltered under the umbrella of philosophy must then stand on their own and justify themselves, from first principles, without pretending that they are mystically connected to some substantial 'repository of wisdom' called 'philosophy'.

8) This will have the effect of exposing much of what passes as ultimate explanations of life and existence – whether from science, or metaphysics, or religion - as based on unprovable assumptions. In other words, when intellectual scrutiny is applied to any of the so-called ultimate solutions to the big questions of life and existence – detached from their mystical background - they invariably collapse into infantile principles which are no less faith-based than the most wish-fulfilling of religious dogmas.

9) What's the next step ? To explore the metaphysics of the human condition, as simply, straightforwardly, objectively and clearly as possible.

The clarification of the principles of philosophy will not usher in a new age of metaphysics. In itself, it is no more than an exercise in intellectual housekeeping, involving tidying things up, and putting them in order. Professional philosophers worldwide are not going to be intimidated by this, or shamed into reforming themselves. This is not the way things go. Nor does it matter that nothing will change; this

clarifying and tidying up is for those who want to make progress towards metaphysical insight on their own, and such people will appreciate this kind of ruthless identification of intellectual subterfuge. Pretending you have access to special knowledge is a well-known feature of most human endeavours, but it is pernicious when it comes to the issues that matter.

Endnotes

[1] Peacocke (2008) p.103.

[2] Cox (2010) p.11: 'philosophy is…the sum total of humankind's accumulated and still accumulating philosophising.'

[3] Gutting (2009) p.106.

[4] Wikiquotes has a series of differing definitions from various famous philosophers, most of them displaying the same conflation of rational analysis with the pursuit of certain kinds of intellectual knowledge. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.112 states that 'The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. The result of philosophy is not a number of 'philosophical propositions', but to make propositions clear. Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred.' And this of all the selected definitions is closest to the one that is being outlined in this article. Anthony Quinton also sounds a hopeful note in his statement that: 'The shortest definition, and it is quite a good one, is that

philosophy is thinking about thinking. That brings out the generally second-order character of the subject, as reflective thought about particular kinds of thinking — formation of beliefs, claims to knowledge — about the world or large parts of it.' But he then goes on to spoil the clarity and simplicity of this characterisation by adding that: 'A more detailed, but still uncontroversial comprehensive, definition is that philosophy is rationally critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind about the general nature of the world (metaphysics or theory of existence), the justification of belief (epistemology or theory of knowledge), and the conduct of life (ethics or theory of value).' This is a considerably more misleading definition because it leads back to exactly the conflation of form and content which needs to be avoided if clarity of thought is to be achieved.

[5]Ayer (1969) p.1.

[6] Hawking (2010) p.5.

[7] Ibid.p.34.

[8] Ibid. p.47.

[9] Well instanced in the documentary 'The Unbelievers' (2014).

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7

Spiritual enlightenment is not about 'permanent non-dual awareness', or anything remotely like it

Introduction

There is a noticeable drift, amongst those who promote spiritual teachings on the internet, towards something like a loose consensus, or a vague coming together, on the matter of what it is that constitutes spiritual enlightenment. We can take one such acknowledged formulation and examine its validity.

The claim exists that spiritual enlightenment is equivalent to 'permanent' or 'abiding' 'non-dual awareness.' 'Awareness' alludes to Buddhistic mindfulness and popular conceptions of living in the now; 'non-dual' reflects the teachings of Advaita Vedanta, and the tag 'permanent' makes it clear that this is a state of a special order.

Analysing and evaluating this particular conception of spiritual enlightenment – and by extension, those similar to it - appropriately and accurately - is not about philosophical cleverness, or religious doctrine, or whether or not it manages to project a certain intuitive cogency. It is about identifying the phenomenon it claims to represent, and assessing its reach, and then examining the extent to which it can meaningfully be said to resolve the mystery of the human predicament. This should be done objectively, and without the intervention and mediation of any form of esoteric doctrine.

A phenomenology of 'awareness'

If we are talking about an 'awareness' –an attentive presence of consciousness – we are talking about a capacity for both a focussed and a diffuse attention on to a field of experience. Attention can be either narrowly focussed, or it can be generalised and noncontracted. Generally speaking, however, if we refer to 'an awareness', we tend to be referring to the generalised, non-contracted attentiveness; and in our normal, everyday experience, our awareness is directed at a field of experience which we experience as being external to us, and therefore very definitely separated from us. We experience something of an intimate awareness of our own bodies, and towards some aspects of the workings of our own minds, but beyond that our awareness is of a field of experience outside of us, and characteristically not of ourselves, and not intimate, and not subjective. This is the classic duality between the 'inner me' and the 'outer world'.

And the major qualitative features of basic experience

– that is, whether it is experienced as internal to me, or as external to me – is, surprisingly perhaps, not contained in the experience itself, but in our perceptual mechanism. A full justification for this assertion is not necessary here, suffice to say that it is eminently possible - for the experiencing subject - to undergo a radical modification in their perceptual capacity, and thereby experience what is normally experienced as external to them as if it were internal, and has become intimately a part of them and not at all separate and objective. 'I' as the lucid subject becomes transformed into a 'greater Self'; expanding, in the process, to incorporate the entire universe into itself. Instead of experiencing the rest of the world as other than me, and external to me, I now experience it as internal to me, and my self-identification expands from the limitations of my body and my mind, to a sense of limitlessness, in that I now identify intimately with everything, and everything seems, in a very real sense, to belong to me. I cannot bend this new universe of 'me-ness' to my previous ego-will - and make this universe do whatever I please - though there doesn't seem any need for me to want to, because the needs of my normal ego have no priority in a universe where my sense of self has expanded to incorporate everything and everyone.

This radical shift in my perceptual capacity may seem impossibly remote to some, but in reality it only involves the merest flick of a perceptual switch. Similar radical shifts of elemental perception are well-known to those who have taken psychoactive drugs, and this is at least part of the evidence to show that the fundamental perceptual features such as 'internal to me' or 'external to me' are not contained in the experience itself, but rather in the essential predisposition of my perceptual capacity. And there are artificial methods whereby the switch can be flicked; taking drugs is one such

method; mystical practices, such as meditation, another.

‘Non-dual awareness’: what does it amount to ?

Having established the basic principle behind ‘non-dual awareness’, we now need to see what we can meaningfully conclude from it. It obviously constitutes a radical departure in our normal perceptual capacity, and it is obviously not something most people would be familiar with, but what would make anyone who found their perceptual capacity transformed in this way believe that they had achieved supreme enlightenment, and had no further to travel on any spiritual path ?

To begin with, we are talking about an event which, in the first instance, overwhelms the intellect. In the immediate aftermath of the radical shift from dual to non-dual, the intellect finds itself both redundant and rudderless, and is powerless to confront the new mandate. All the old certainties, and apparent convictions, have been abolished, and a sense of quiet, inner, cosmic confidence has taken their place. No more the tiny little frightened ego; now a greater Self which contains everything there ever was or ever could be, underpinned by a tremendous sense of achievement and satisfaction. The intellect, which previously might have spoiled the party with its mischievous questioning, has been silenced.

Secondly, there is the fact that the levels of expectation, brought about by years of reading books, listening to lectures, meditating, thinking, discussion and argument, seem to have been fulfilled to the furthest degree, perhaps even surpassed. All the mystical scriptures – the

Upanishads, some Buddhist Sutras, the writings of Shankara, the utterances of Ramana Maharishi – are now perfectly transparent, and could have been written with no purpose in mind other than accurately to describe this very event. The whole situation figures in a very direct and convincing way, and is backed up by all the holy books. Why would you question it ?

However, if you have had the good fortune to be intellectually acquainted and familiarised with a metaphysical perspective which seeks to fulfil the capacity to know and reflect for its own sake, and in its own right, rather than for the sake of the subjective self, you can relatively quickly understand what this particular event –the arrival of a non-dual awareness - is all about, and not be dazzled by it. Of course at the moment of transformation, no-one can withstand being astonished by the sheer force of the event, or failed to be awestruck at its myriad implications, but in the days and weeks that follow, the grip of the initial euphoria begins to diminish, and everything slowly starts to return to normal: the little ego returns. Now it also happens, in some cases, that this new expanded awareness of my expanded self – the greater Self – rather than returning to normal, remains in consciousness, either as a trace element, or as a full-blown feature, leading to what is termed 'permanent non-dual awareness'; so the lucid subject continues to experience everything as if it were a product of their own mind, rather than as if it were external to them. This may seem to some like a tremendous spiritual advancement, but in truth not very much has been achieved.

And following on from this, a further point to note from the metaphysical perspective which seeks to fulfil the capacity for knowledge on its own terms - and not on those of subjective self-aggrandisement - is that by transforming your awareness from a fragmented, dualistic, ordinary, everyday normality into a permanent nonduality, you have actually succeeded in damaging your relationship with normality, and can no longer be sure that your judgement is underpinned by the kind of sombre and thoroughly ordinary everydayness that the rest of the world is familiar with. This is not as trivial an observation as it might seem, because genuine spiritual progress requires sanity, and normality, and everydayness for its insights to be tested against. If you now exist permanently in a distorting new zone of consciousness, what exactly have you succeeded in doing ?

But more to the point, what can we conclude from all this ? Basically that tinkering with our perceptual access to experience - our primary mode of awareness - and having this perceptual alternation interfere with the quality of our normal experiencing, is not as significant an achievement as it first appears. It can only continue to be regarded as of the utmost significance if it is sustained by an intellectual environment which values such achievements, and which reinforces them by various transparently inconclusive methods, such as validating them by reference to scriptural and textual sources.

Spirituality as the quest for principial insight

But if 'permanent non-dual awareness' – and all sorts of other kinds of altered states of consciousness - do not

qualify as supreme enlightenment, where else do we look ? The fact is, approaching the whole subject of spirituality from the perspective of altered states of consciousness is essentially mistaken, though thoroughly understandable, given the way humans think, and given the way they try to turn everything into something tangible, graspable, and attainable by force of will. But spiritual enlightenment is not a matter of achieving specialised and apparently high octane altered states of consciousness, it is a matter of allowing the 'knowing capacity' at the centre of our being to fulfil itself on its own terms. Our 'knowing capacity' does this by shifting – slowly, over a considerable period of time - from a position whereby the human subject – the ordinary self-centred individual - is the epicentre of all knowledge, significance and meaning, towards a perspective whereby 'knowing' and 'knowledge' are no longer constrained by such self-centred concerns, and which can then operate according to an utterly unforeseen – and unimaginable - modality.

And it only a modality of the order of 'knowing' which can possibly shed light on the mysteries at the base of the human condition. Anything else is simply an additional mystery which may well modify the basic features of the human predicament, but not resolve it. Some might argue that the attainment of super-states of consciousness obviates the need for any resolution, because the basic predicament has been dispensed with, and a new and improved condition of being imposed over the old, obliterating it, but this can only be a valid outcome if an adequately evolved intellect could find its fulfilment in such improved conditions of being, and this is

clearly not the case. A healthy intellect, once it has regained its footing, will cut 'permanent non-dual awareness' down to size.

The faculty which our 'knowing capacity' employs to achieve this new modality is that of 'insight' – our ordinary, everyday, and familiar capacity for insight - but now to be employed specifically in the service of our knowing lucidity (in all its forms and abilities), to elucidate it, and to bring it into reflective consciousness, and no longer to be so concerned with individual self-advancement, and individual self-preservation. The shift in insight is towards what Meister Eckhart termed 'principial knowledge': knowledge on its own terms, unrestricted by human concerns. Knowledge in this modality would give you principial insight into everything that has ever been or could ever be, as there is nothing other than it anywhere, in any state, or in any mode of existence. It is this which constitutes supreme spiritual enlightenment, not some modified state of consciousness. Spirituality is therefore a steady movement away from a limited, self-centred knowing, towards a limitless knowing-in-itself; though this is never going to be a form of limitlessness as imagined by a human self –which will always be pictured as a kind of massive collection of facts – but to a limitlessness appropriate to the unconditioned order of knowledge on its own terms. Supreme enlightenment is to be found in a realm of this sort, and not in realms which relates to human accomplishment, because these, with their essential self-centredness, are as remote from 'unconstrained knowing' as anything could be. The conception of spirituality outlined here is obviously quite other than that which you might find in orthodox religions as well as in New Age schools, both of which always seek – using

mystical practices like meditation, prayer, contemplation and the rest - to turn the ordinary lowly individual into some kind of perceptually-enhanced super-experiencer, not understanding that spirituality is to be found in principial knowing, not in gross states of mind.

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What can your ordinary thinking mind tell you about how to go about spiritual enlightenment ?

This may look like a strangely inappropriate question, and something of a misjudgement, because spirituality is all about yielding to powerful forces which have nothing to do with thought, and thinking, and the intellect. Spirituality comes from the heart, and from higher emotions, and from a deep sensitivity not appreciated by people who are caught up in materialism and worldliness. Spiritual people immerse themselves in meditation and mystical states, devotion and sacred environments, and they want to get away from the polluting effects of secular society. So the idea of taking a good look at the boring old mundane thinking process is the last thing on any seeker's mind, despite the fact that everyone – without exception – has to use this same boring old mundane thinking process to make their judgements.

For most people, spirituality is all about giving their intuitive heart total priority over their thinking head. Spirituality is understood to be a matter of responding to the nebulous but compelling cravings that seem to point to an inner absence of some kind, an absence seemingly calling for union with a greater Being. A small minority of people come at this compelling sense of human abandonment from a more intellectual angle, and characterise their search in terms of answering the big questions of life and existence such as 'What's it all about ?', 'What is the meaning of life ?', 'What's the point of it all ?', but even in these cases, there is a tendency to believe that the intellect is not going to be of any use in supplying the answers, and you will need to put all your trust into what you intuitively sense and feel. The average seeker is not in the least worried about 'knowing' or having a clear sight as to what is going on, or what is bothering them – they are simply concerned somehow to be able to connect, as quickly as possible, with some sort of great ongoing sense of cosmic reassurance, and this they will tell themselves is the divine and spiritual truth they have been looking for. That's more or less the beginning and end of their exercise in intellectual discrimination.

And if one investigates the various brands of New Age mysticism now everywhere to be found – mindfulness, vipassana, non-duality, zazen, whatever – it is not difficult to see that all these teachings, whatever they may claim about themselves, consistently disparage the capacity of mind known as the discriminating intellect. Mystical teachings are invariably based on trifling doctrinal propositions with no intellectual depth to them at all, and followers are more than happy to defend doctrinal vacuity on the grounds that real

spirituality is all about 'doing', and 'practicing', and 'being immersed in', not about 'thinking'. You 'do' – that is, you partake and practice and meditate - your way into the right spiritual state, not 'think' your way. Thinking is for people who can't tune in to the right vibe, man. Thinking is for people who are probably not really all that spiritual in the first place. Just go to YouTube for proof.

And that's not the worst of it. Because, when it comes down to it, the intellectual thinking capacity of mind can't be trusted. It has the ability to spoil everything, while being unable to deliver anything worthwhile of its own. It simply undermines all your deepest religious feelings and aspirations, poisoning your thoughts and then leaving you empty handed. Thinking is portrayed as taking you away from the truth, and crippling your spirituality: all those useless questions and endless options, bothering you until you can't think straight. Thinking ruins everything. As they say, if you're going into spirituality, best to leave your brain outside the door.

All this would be fine, delightful, if any of it were remotely valid. The truth is, your ordinary, everyday intellect – your bog standard, front-of-the-house capacity to think – is all you have when it comes to working out what you need to do with regard to your spiritual development. You can pretend to yourself you have some special discriminatory ability which transcends the intellect and can do a better job of guiding you to spiritual heights, but if you care to examine the facts you can easily see that you have no such ability, and that all you are doing is grabbing hold of familiar and reassuring so-called 'spiritual feelings' and then twisting your thoughts to suit them. This can work in the long term if you are feeble minded – that is, weak willed, easily convinced,

believing, trusting, gullible – but for those who are not, trusting your emotions and sentiments to distort reality for their own ends is a recipe for disaster. You are basically refusing to accept any unpleasant and inconvenient aspects of reality by turning your back on them, and if you are at least some way towards being a grownup, your innate capacity for judgement won't put up with this indefinitely. You end up making a fool of yourself, as you struggle to justify – subliminally, inwardly – ideas which are either clearly untrue, or, more disconcertingly, vaguely immature, and adolescent, and silly. These tend to be either New Age mystical ideas of spiritual effortlessness and compulsory optimism, or traditional religious beliefs in worship and submission and devotion as part of various highly sentimentalised doctrines. Any sort of teaching which appeals directly to the heart, and which does not and cannot acknowledge the power of the intellect in equal if not greater measure, is guaranteed to be infantile, inwardly demeaning, and ultimately unworkable. The heart is a viciously blind and self-obsessed experiential capacity, and it only rules the head if you let it.

So what can your simple, everyday, ordinary, bog standard, front-of-the-house 'capacity to think things through' tell you about spirituality ? If you give it time, and treat it with the respect it is due, quite a lot. Quite a bit. When we refer to 'thinking', we are not talking here about the capacity for tormenting yourself endlessly with obsessive and compulsive anxieties about nothing in particular, or with the capacity to fixate on a thought, and have it spin around in your head for days at a time. Nor is thinking equivalent with to an open-ended doubting and questioning of every little detail, leading to intellectual paralysis. Such mental quirks and torments are everyone's lot now and then, but they are of no interest here, even if some of the more small-minded religious teachers

believe that these transient irritations are the only things any mind can do. What we are talking about is the ordinary, everyday, unexceptional capacity to examine an idea from different angles, weigh up the options, and then make a decision based on the evidence that you have access to, while always being prepared to reconsider your view if new and better evidence comes along. No special abilities are required for this kind of simple mental reflection, though a modest secular school education will help, as will any ability to treat all the elements of any phenomenon, including your likes and dislikes, as objectively as possible. If you can think about things clearly and objectively - or would seriously like to - then the ordinary, everyday, simple and unadorned intellect can take you – and of course it'll be a long and difficult journey - from a state of complete metaphysical confusion all the way to the gates of Enlightenment. More to the point, it's the only instrument – the only capacity - at your disposal which can get you there. You don't have anything else which you can use. And if you are minded to scoff at this statement, and dismiss it as underendowed with both mystical virtue and universal compassion, then consider which part of your anatomy you're using to make that judgement. If you head straight for your so-called spiritual feelings and use them to justify your sense of righteousness, then you are demeaning your capacity for clarity of vision, and will be unable to appreciate the modality which transcends human beinghood: for that you need to be able to try to see yourself, with all your human limitations, in a much more objective light.

How do you do this ? How do you sort out what it is you ought to be doing, when it comes to resolving spiritual questions ? By sitting quietly somewhere, with a pen and notepad, and setting about working things out. Clear you mind, and forget about yourself for a moment. Put all your

self-obsessive thoughts on hold, at least for the time it takes to think clearly. You can always come back to your self-obsession after your few minutes of clear thinking. Nothing will be lost in trying to think objectively, and everything will be gained if you can manage a short stretch of clear thought. Start off with the simplest of simple questions: what exactly is the problem ? That is to say, what exactly is the spiritual problem you are trying to solve ? In other words, what exactly is wrong with you that you would like to put right ? Can you identify it ? If not, why not ? Try to find the words to formulate your thoughts. Look at what you have written, and make sure the words you have used to express your thoughts are as accurate as possible in matching what you think. You may have to come back to your formulation in a few days, weeks or months [or even years] and take another look at it. If it can be improved upon, then improve it. Pay special attention to the words, always trying to find exactly the words that nail the thought. The right words help focus and direct your thinking in an unimprovably effective way. What exactly is the essence of the spiritual problem ? Keep your formulations as clear and as simple as possible. One or two or three sentences at a time will do. Don't let yourself start gushing in all directions: keep it simple. Maybe the question 'What exactly is the problem ?' doesn't seem to bring your ideas into focus. Then try a slightly different question, and come back to the 'What exactly is the problem ?' at a later stage. Try a question like 'How can I think clearly and objectively about spiritual matters ? What do I need to do ?', or 'How could I know whether or not I am deluding myself, when I think about spirituality ?' Find questions that reflect exactly what is bothering you, when it comes to spirituality. Keep asking yourself, 'When I settle on an idea, how could I find a way that would tell me if I have thought the right idea, or not ? How could I find a way to know these things objectively, without having to refer to feelings, or

getting lost in other thoughts ? How could I do this ?' Don't worry about what you have read, or what philosophers have said, or the Dalai Lama, or anyone. Learn to examine your own thoughts, and see what they have to say, what they tell you, what information they give you.

Now a few minutes of this will soon reveal to you that the problem at hand is considerable, and confusion and hopelessness are pretty much the order of the day. But don't give up. Persist. Keep going. Take a few minutes every now and then to sit down with your notebook and go over what you have been working at. Try some different thoughts, some different angles. Put your likes and dislikes on hold; don't let them distort your vision, your clarity of thinking. Put your yearnings, and spiritual desires on hold as well. In order to think objectively you will have to disregard yourself from time to time. You may have to pretend, at least for the time it takes to think things through, that you count for nothing, that you have no significance whatsoever in the great cosmic confusion that is existence. Try it, it will greatly assist your attempts at objectivity and clarity. You can always come back to yourself later; you will not lose yourself in some kind of intellectual vortex. Vortices are for mystics and the deranged. You are going for clarity, and simplicity, and objectivity.

How long does all this take before you get a positive result ? Regardless of various feelings that might come and go, you cannot really expect any serious progress inside six months at the very earliest. It may take considerably longer, say two or three years, or ten years, depending on the amount of effort you put into it. Or you may be lucky, and your progress will be extremely rapid. But if you take these things seriously, speed is not of the essence. And what exactly counts as progress ? To begin with, just the 'sense' that clarity of

thought is coming to you, slowly but surely, month by month. And as a result of clarity of thought, some new avenues of exploration with regard to your thinking will occur to you, and you will start to gain greater confidence in identifying and isolating different capacities of mind, and you will start to have a greater insight into how exactly your mind is informing you as to what your experience is all about, and how it works, and what the different features of experience are, and where the confusions are, and so on. And as a result of this you will soon find it surprisingly easy to judge the validity – or otherwise – of what the great religious teachers have to say about what the problem with the human being is, and how to solve it. Later on – much later – other things will start to happen, but you will need to see these for yourself.

If simple and persistent exploratory thinking is the solution to human spirituality, who don't more people engage in it ? Why is it not written about in the great scriptures ? How come the big names of religion, mysticism and spirituality don't know about it ? Why do they all tell us to do something else entirely ? This is one of the great existential mysteries, and it doesn't admit of an easy answer. Why do humans always look south when they should be looking north ? Why do people cling to what they know even when they would be better off accepting change ? Perhaps we just have to accept that the human is a certain kind of creature, and it can't help being what it is. But if you are one of the few who genuinely would like to find out 'what is what', you will have to get your mind in gear, and start learning how to think clearly and objectively. There is no other way.

However, there is an extremely important point which

can be made at this stage which may go some way to explaining why this simple, straightforward method of self-inquiry is never practiced, and seldom even grasped. When you turn your analytical and discriminating intellect on to the matter of your spiritual situation, you need to do it in such a way that the goal of your efforts is objective spiritual clarity and illumination on its own terms, and not for the purposes of any other kind of knowledge. You are not trying to be a clever philosopher, or a successful public debater, or the promoter of a new religious teaching. You are not on the hunt for something which you can parade in public and which would give you special status. You are simply trying to achieve spiritual, metaphysical knowledge for its own sake, not for the purposes of selfaggrandisement. Fortunately for us, metaphysical knowledge for its own sake, and our very best self-interest, coincide completely and utterly: they are one and the same thing, although it is almost impossible to recognise and understand this to begin with. This particular and distinct modality of metaphysical knowledge needs to be identified as 'gnosis' to distinguish it from ordinary factual knowledge, and it is not to be confused with knowledge of any other type, which always involves cleverness, learning, public displays, and so on, and is essentially characterised by the accumulation of various facts, such that the more facts you know, the more impressive and extensive your knowledge. Gnosis is not about the accumulation of facts, or the clever orchestration and parading of facts, or with anything to do with improving and enhancing your worldly self in any way. The fact is, paradoxically, the deeper your inner metaphysical knowledge – that is to say, the deeper your genuine gnosis – the less you will feel the need to make any kind of public exhibition of your achievement.

Why this and not something else ? Because this is the

only method that can conceivably work. All – repeat all – other religious and mystical practices are delusory, and lead only to the enhancement and aggrandisement of the human self through various types of experience. But it needs to be said here that there is considerable value in sampling some of these other methods – meditation, devotion, whatever - for yourself, and discovering for yourself that they don't work, and are delusory, and ultimately unsatisfying. The logic of their uselessness is clear, but if you are tormented by the sneaking suspicion that you are missing out on something, then, by all means, try them for yourself. And if you discover that the euphoria of some mystical state or another is really what you are all about, then there you go. But if your intellect is not convinced that euphoria or well-being is really the last word on the lucidity of mind you possess, then you will be sympathetic to a teaching which seeks to have that lucidity fulfil itself, on its own terms.

So where does it all lead ? Your efforts will eventually, somehow, alert you to a different modality of knowledge [gnosis] than the one which persistently keeps you and your 'self-interest' at the centre of any and every perception, thought and reflection. This different modality is almost impossible to justify adequately in a short piece of writing like this, but it will more than justify itself if you can take the time and effort to explore its reality.

Isn't this what Krishnamurti was teaching ? No it is not, despite one or two very superficial similarities. Nor is it anything to do with mindfulness, vipassana, living in the now, non-dual awareness, transcendental meditation, born-again Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Sufism, zazen, tantra yoga, or formal meditation or yoga of any conceivable kind. There is no prayer, contemplation, recollection, immersion or devotion

involved.

Do you need a teacher ? It would greatly help, but you are most unlikely to find one. The entire world of spirituality, mysticism and religion is in the hands of those who have no idea what they are up to. You will therefore need to be your own teacher, and for this reason you will have to apply the strictest and most exacting standards to all your metaphysical thinking. Always be telling yourself that you have missed something, that you could try harder, that you have somehow fallen short of the best. Never be satisfied with even the most convincing discoveries that you make.

Is all this serious ? Can you really be saying that this absurdly simple method of thinking things through, and this absurdly simple method alone, leads to spiritual Enlightenment ? The answer is yes. Then what about all the millions of years of meditation by naked yogis in the Himalayas ? All the zazen, the satoris, the koans, the crazy wisdom, the crucifixions, the tantric sex, the drugs, sweat and tears, the gnashing of teeth, the permanent non-dual awareness, the cosmic consciousness ? All worthless, null and void, empty, of no value to the serious seeker of genuine metaphysical knowledge. All you have to do is give the little flame of lucidity - which is your mind's eye - a chance to shine, and it will show you where to go. This is no small undertaking, but it does not require special equipment, university degrees, or validation by authority. You just have to work at it, patiently, over time. It cannot deliver of itself, but it, and only it, can lead you to the door. The door has to be opened from the other side. Sorry, deepest apologies to all the heavyweight meditators, devotees, gurus, saints and beautiful people, but it's a fact. You cannot open it yourself. All you can do when you get to the final door is make yourself comfortable, and wait

patiently. This last detail is something humans instinctively dislike, because they want to feel that everything is within their power, and sheer force of will can make anything come true. This type of thinking is adolescent, deluded. And it is not really such a bad thing, when you think about it, that the ultimate keys to life, the universe, existence, everything and nothing, are not ours to play with.

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